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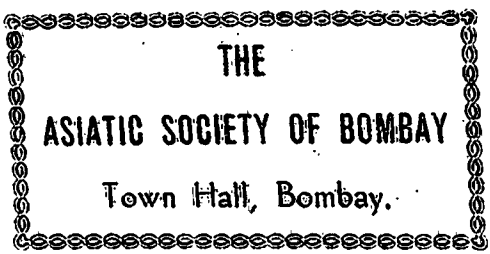

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ELEANOR'S VICTORY.

ELEANOR'S VICTORY.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS,

18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1863.

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LONDON:
BRADBURY AND EVANS, PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

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ELEANOR'S VICTORY.

CHAPTER I.

RESOLVED.

ELEANOR MONCKTON walked slowly back to the house, by the side of her husband, whose eyes never left his wife's face during that short walk between the garden-gate and the long French window by which the two girls had left the drawing-room. Even in the dusk, Gilbert Monckton could see that his wife's face was unusually pale.

She spoke to him as they entered the drawing-room, laying her hand upon his arm as she addressed him, and looking earnestly at him in the red firelight.

"Is Mr. de Crespigny really dying, Gilbert?" she asked.

"I fear that, from what the medical men say, there is very little doubt about it. The old man is going fast."

Eleanor paused for a few moments, with her head bent and her face hidden from her husband.

Then, suddenly looking up, she spoke to him again; this time with intense earnestness.

"Gilbert, I want to see Mr. de Crespigny before he dies; I want to see him alone—I must see him!"

The lawyer stared at his wife in utter bewilderment. What in Heaven's name was the meaning of this sudden energy, this intense eagerness, which blanched the colour in her cheeks, and held her breathless? Her friendly feeling for the invalid, her womanly pity for an old man's infirmities, could never have been powerful enough to cause such emotion.

"You want to see Maurice de Crespigny, Eleanor?" repeated Mr. Monckton, in a tone of undisguised wonder. "But why do you want to see him?"

"I have something to tell him—something that he *must* know before he dies."

The lawyer started. A sudden light broke

in upon his bewildered mind,—a light that showed him the woman he loved in very odious colours.

"You want to tell him who you are?"

"To tell him who I am? yes!" Eleanor answered absently.

"But for what reason?"

Mrs. Monckton was silent for a moment, looking thoughtfully at her husband.

"My reason is a secret, Gilbert," she said; "I cannot even tell it to you—yet. But I hope to do so very, very soon. Perhaps to-night."

The lawyer bit his under lip, and walked away from his wife with a frown upon his face. He left Eleanor standing before the fireplace, and took two or three turns up and down the room, pacing backwards and forwards in moody silence.

Then, suddenly returning to her, he said, with an air of angry resolution that chilled her timid confidence in him, and cast her back upon herself, "Eleanor, there is something in all this that wounds me to the very quick. There is a mystery between us; a mystery that has lasted too long. Why did you stipulate that your maiden name should be kept a secret from Maurice de Cres-

pigny! Why have you paid him court ever since your coming to this place? And why, now that you hear of his approaching death, do you want to force yourself into his presence? Eleanor, Eleanor, there can be but one reason for all this, and that the most sordid, the most miserable and mercenary of reasons."

George Vane's daughter looked at her husband with a stare of blank dismay, as if she was trying, but trying in vain, to attach some meaning to his words.

"A sordid reason—a mercenary reason," she repeated slowly, in a half whisper.

"Yes, Eleanor," answered Gilbert Monckton, passionately. "Why should you be different from the rest of the world? It has been my error, my mad delusion to think you so; as I once thought another woman who crushed my hopes of happiness as recklessly as a child shatters a plaything it has got tired of. It has been my folly to trust and believe in you, forgetful of the past, false to the teaching of most bitter experience. I have been mistaken—once more—all the more egregiously, perhaps, because this time I thought I was so deliberate, so cautious. You are *not* different to the rest of the world.

If other women are mercenary, you too are mercenary. You are not content with having sacrificed your inclination for the sake of making what the world calls an advantageous marriage. You are not satisfied with having won a wealthy husband, and you seek to inherit Maurice de Crespigny's fortune."

Eleanor Monckton passed both her hands across her forehead, pushing back the loose masses of her hair, as if she would by that movement have cleared away some of the clouds that overshadowed her brain.

"*I* seek to inherit Mr. de Crespigny's fortune," she murmured.

"Yes! Your father no doubt educated you in that idea. I have heard how obstinately he built upon the inheritance of his friend's wealth. He taught you to share his hopes: he bequeathed them to you as the only legacy he had to give—"

"No!" cried Eleanor, suddenly; "the inheritance I received at my father's death was no inheritance of hope. Do not say any more to me, Mr. Monckton. It seems as if my brain had no power to bear all this to-night. If you can think these base things of me, I must be

content to endure your bad opinion. I know that I have been very forgetful of you, very neglectful of you, since I have been your wife, and you have reason to think badly of me. But my mind has been so full of other things; so full, that it has seemed to me as if all else in life — except those thoughts, that one hope — slipped by me like the events of a dream."

Gilbert Monckton looked half-fearfully at his wife as she spoke. There was something in her manner that he had never seen before. He had seen her only when her feelings had been held in check by her utmost power of repression. That power was beginning to wear out now. The strain upon Eleanor's intellect had been too great, and her nerves were losing their power of tension.

"Do not say anything more to me," she cried, imploringly; "do not say anything more. It will soon be over now."

"What will soon be over, Eleanor?"

But Eleanor did not answer. She clasped her hands before her face; a half-stifled sob broke from her lips, and she hurried from the room before her husband could repeat his question.

Mr. Monckton looked after her with an expression of unmingled anguish on his face.

"How can I doubt the truth?" he thought; "her indignant repudiation of any design on Maurice de Crespigny's fortune exonerates her at least from that charge. But her agitation, her tears, her confusion, all betray the truth. Her heart has never been mine. She married me with the determination to do her duty to me, and to be true to me. I believe that. Yes, in spite of all, I will believe that. But her love is Launcelot Darrell's. Her love, the one blessing I sought to win,—the blessing which in my mad folly I was weak enough to hope for,—is given to Laura's betrothed husband. What could be plainer than the meaning of those last broken words she spoke just now: 'It will soon be over; it will soon be over'? What should she mean except that Launcelot Darrell's marriage and departure will put an end to the struggle of her life."

Mingled with the bitterness of his grief, some feeling akin to pity had a place in Gilbert Monckton's heart.

He pitied her—yes, he pitied this girl whose life it had been his fate to overshadow. He had

come between this bright young creature and the affection of her innocent girlhood, and, presenting himself before her in the hour of her desolation, had betrayed her into one of those mistakes which a lifetime of honest devotion is not always able to repair.

"She consented to marry me on the impulse of the moment, clinging to me in her loneliness and helplessness, and blinded to the future by the sorrow of the present. It was an instinct of confidence, and not love that drew her towards me; and now, now that there is no retreat —no drawing back—nothing but a long vista of dreary years to be spent with a man she does not love, this poor unhappy girl suffers an agony which can no longer be concealed, even from me."

Mr. Monckton paced up and down his spacious drawing-room, thinking of these things. Once he looked with a sad, bitter smile at the evidences of wealth that were so lavishly scattered about the handsome chamber. On every side those evidences met his eyes. The Guido, upon which the firelight gleamed, kindling the face of a martyr into supernatural glory, was worth a sum that would have been a fortune to a poor man.

Every here and there, half hidden amongst the larger modern pictures, lurked some tiny gem of Italian art, a few square inches of painted canvas worth full a hundred times its weight of unalloyed gold.

"If my wife were as frivolous as Laura," thought Mr. Monckton, "I could make her happy, perhaps. Fine dresses, and jewels, and pictures, and furniture, would be enough to make happiness for an empty-headed woman. If Eleanor had been influenced by mercenary feelings when she married me she would have surely made more use of my wealth; she would have paraded the jewellery I have given her, and made herself a lay figure for the display of milliner's work; at least while the novelty of her position lasted. But she has dressed as plainly as a village tradesman's wife, and the only money she has spent is that which she has given to her friend the music-mistress."

The second dinner-bell rang while Gilbert Monckton was pacing the empty drawing room, and he went straight to the dining-room in his frock-coat, and with no very great appetite for the dishes that were to be set before him.

Eleanor took her place at the top of the table.

She wore a brown silk dress, a few shades darker than her auburn hair, and her white shoulders gleamed like ivory against bronze. She had bathed her head and face with cold water, and her rippling hair was still wet. She was very pale, very grave; but all traces of violent emotion had passed away, and there was a look of quiet determination about her mouth.

Laura Mason came rustling and fluttering into the room, as Mr. and Mrs. Monckton took their places at the dinner-table.

"It's my PINK," said the young lady, alluding to a very elaborate toilette of blush-rose coloured silk, bedizened with innumerable yards of lace and ribbon.

"I thought you would like to see my pink, and I want to know how it looks. It's the new colour. Launcelot says the new colour is like strawberry-ices, but I like it. It's one of the dinner dresses in my trousseau, you know," she murmured, apologetically, to Mr. Monckton; "and I wanted to try the effect of it, though of course it's only to be worn at a party. The trimmings on the cross set beautifully; don't they, Eleanor?"

It was fortunate, perhaps, on this occasion at

least, that Miss Mason possessed the faculty of keeping up a kind of conversational monologue, for otherwise there must have been a very dreary silence at the dinner-table upon this particular evening.

Gilbert Monckton only spoke when the business of the meal compelled him to do so. But there was a certain tenderness of tone in the very few words he had occasion to address to his wife which was utterly different to his manner before dinner. It was never Mr. Monckton's habit to sit long over the dismal expanse of a dessert-table; but to-night, when the cloth had been removed and the two women left the room, he followed them without any delay whatever.

Eleanor seated herself in a low chair by the fireplace. She had looked at her watch twice during dinner, and now her eyes wandered almost involuntarily to the dial of the clock upon the chimney-piece.

Her husband crossed the room and leant for a few moments over her chair.

"I am sorry for what I said this afternoon, Eleanor," he murmured in a low voice; "can you forgive me?"

His wife lifted her eyes to his face. Those

luminous grey eyes had a look of mournful sweetness in them.

"Forgive you!" exclaimed Eleanor, "it is you who have so much to forgive. But I will atone —I will atone—after to-night."

She said these last words almost in a whisper, rather as if she had been speaking to herself than to her husband; but Gilbert Monckton heard those whispered syllables, and drew his own conclusions from them. Unhappily every word that Mrs. Monckton uttered tended to confirm her husband's doubts and to increase his wretchedness.

He seated himself in a reading-chair upon the opposite side of the hearth, and, drawing a lamp close to his elbow, buried himself, or appeared to bury himself, in his newspapers.

But every now and then the upper margin of the "Times," or the "Post," or the "Athenæum," or the "Saturday," or whatever journal the lawyer happened to be perusing—and he took up one after the other with a fretful restlessness that betokened a mind ill at ease—dropped a little lower than the level of the reader's eyes, and Mr. Monckton looked across the edge of the paper at his wife.

Almost every time he did so he found that Eleanor's eyes were fixed upon the clock.

The discovery of this fact speedily became a torture to him. He followed his wife's eyes to the slowly moving hands upon the enamelled dial. He watched the minute hand as it glided from one figure to another, marking intervals of five minutes that seemed like five hours. Even when he tried to read, the loud ticking of the wretched time-piece came between him and the sense of the page upon which his eyes were fixed, and the monotonous sound seemed to deafen him.

Eleanor sat quite still in her low easy chair. Scraps of fancy-work and open books lay upon the table beside her, but she made no effort to beguile the evening by any feminine occupation. Laura Mason, restless for want of employment and companionship, fluttered about the room like some discontented butterfly, stopping every now and then before a looking-glass, to contemplate some newly discovered effect in the elegant costume which she called her "pink;" but Eleanor took no notice whatever of her murmured exclamations and appeals for sympathy.

"I don't know what's come to you, Nelly, since your marriage," the young lady cried at last; after vainly trying to draw Mrs. Monckton's attention to the manifold beauties of gauze puffings and floating streamers of ribbon; "you don't seem to take any interest in life. You're quite a different girl to what you were at Hazlewood—before Launcelot came home."

Mr. Monckton threw down the "Athenæum," and took up "Punch," at this juncture. He stared with a stony face at one of Mr. Leech's most genial cartoons, and glanced almost vengefully at the familiar double columns of jokes. Eleanor looked away from the clock to answer her companion's peevish complaint.

"I am thinking of Mr. de Crespigny," she said; "he may be dying while we are sitting here."

Mr. Monckton dropped "Punch," and looked, openly this time, at his wife's face.

Could it be, after all, that her abstraction of manner really arose from no deeper cause than her regret for the loss of this old man, who was her dead father's friend, and who had displayed an especial affection for her?

Could it be so? No! Her words that night had revealed more than a common sorrow such as this. They had betrayed the secret of a hidden struggle—a woman's grief—not easily to be repressed or overcome. There is no knowing how long the lawyer might have sat brooding over his troubles under cover of the newspapers, but presently he remembered some papers which he had brought from London that afternoon, and which it was his imperative duty—in the interests of a very important client—to read that night.

He pushed away the lamp, rose from his low chair, and went to the door of the drawing-room.

"I am going to my study, Eleanor," he said; "I shall most likely spend the rest of the evening there, and I may be obliged to be very late. You won't sit up for me?"

"Oh, no; not unless you wish it."

"On no account. Good-night. Good-night, Laura."

Even while his wife wished him good-night, her eyes wandered uneasily back to the clock. A quarter to ten.

"And he hasn't once looked at my pink!"

murmured Miss Mason, as her guardian left the drawing-room.

Scarcely had the door closed when Eleanor Monckton rose from her chair.

Her flushed cheeks flamed with crimson brightness; her eyes were lighted up as if a fire had burned in her dilated pupils.

"I am going to bed, Laura," she said abruptly; "I am very tired. Good night!"

She took a candle from a table near the door, lit it, and hurried from the room before Laura could question her or remonstrate with her.

"She doesn't *look* tired," thought Miss Mason; "she looks as if she were going to a ball; or going to have the scarlatina. I think I looked like that when I was going to have the scarlatina; and when Launcelot proposed to me."

Five minutes after the stable-clock had struck ten, the great door of Tolldale Priory was opened by a cautious hand, and Mrs. Monckton stole out of her house with a woollen cloak wrapped about her, and her head almost buried in the hood belonging to the thick winter garment. She closed the door softly; and then, without stopping

to look behind her, hurried down the broad stone steps, across the courtyard, along the gravelled garden pathway, out at the narrow wooden door in the wall, and away into the dreary darkness of the wood that lay between the Priory grounds and the dwelling-place of Maurice de Crespigny.

CHAPTER II.

A TERRIBLE SURPRISE.

With the chill winds of February blowing in her face, Eleanor Monckton entered the wood between Tolldale and Mr. de Crespigny's estate.

There were no stars in the blank grey sky above that lonely place; black masses of pine and fir shut in the narrow path upon either side; mysterious noises, caused by the capricious moaning of the winter wind, sounded far away in the dark recesses of the wood, awfully distinct amid the stillness of the night.

It was very long since Eleanor had been out alone after dark, and she had never before been alone in the darkness of such a place as this. She had the courage of a young lioness, but she had also a highly nervous and sensitive nature, an imaginative temperament; and the solemn loneliness of this wood, resonant every now and then with the dismal cries of the night-wind, was very

terrible to her. But above and beyond every natural womanly feeling was this girl's devotion to her dead father; and she walked on with her thick shawl gathered closely round her, and with both her hands pressed against her beating heart.

She walked on through the solitude and the darkness, not indifferently, but devotedly; in sublime self-abnegation; in the heroic grandeur of a soul that is elevated by love; as she would have walked through fire and water, if by the endurance of such an ordeal she could have given fresh proof of her affection for that hapless suicide of the Faubourg Saint Antoine.

"My dear father," she murmured once, in a low voice, "I have been slow to act, but I have never forgotten. I have never forgotten you lying far away from me in that cruel foreign grave. I have waited, but I will wait no longer. I will speak to-night."

I think she believed that George Vane, divided from her by the awful chasm which yawns, mysterious and unfathomable, betwixt life and death, was yet near enough akin to her, in his changed state of being, to witness her actions and hear her words. She spoke to him, as she would have

written to him had he been very far away from her, in the belief that her words would reach him, sooner or later.

The walk, which in the daytime seemed only a pleasant ramble, was a weary pilgrimage under the starless winter sky. Eleanor stopped once or twice to look back at the lighted windows of Tolldale lying low in the hollow behind her; and then hurried on with a quicker step.

"If Gilbert should miss me," she thought, "what will he do? what will he think?"

She quickened her pace even more as she thought of her husband. What unlooked for difficulties might she not have to combat if Mr. Monckton should discover her absence and send or go himself in search of her?

She had reached the outskirts of the wood by this time, and the low gate in the iron fence—the gateway through which she had passed upon the day when, for the first time, she saw her father's old friend, Maurice de Crespigny.

This gate was very rarely locked or bolted, but to-night, to her surprise, she found it wide open.

She did not stop to wonder at this circumstance, but hurried on. She had grown very familiar

with every pathway in the grounds during her walks beside Mr. de Crespigny's invalid chair, and she knew the nearest way to the house.

This nearest way was across a broad expanse of turf, and through a shrubbery into the garden at the back of the rooms occupied by the old man, who had for many years been unable to go up and down stairs, and who had, for that length of time, inhabited a suite of rooms on the ground-floor, opening with French windows on to a tiny lawn, shut in and sheltered by a thick belt of pine and evergreens. It was in this shrubbery that Eleanor paused for a few moments to recover her breath after hurrying up the hill, and to reassure herself as to the safety of the papers which she carried in the bosom of her dress—Launcelot Darrell's water-colour sketch, and her father's letter. The picture and the letter were safe. She reassured herself of this, and was about to hurry on, when she was arrested by a sound near her. The laurel branches close beside her had rustled as if parted by a man's strong hand.

Many times, in her journey through the wood, Eleanor had been terrified by a rustling amongst the long grass about the trunks of the trees; but each time the sight of a pheasant flying across her

pathway, or a frightened hare scudding away into the darkness, had reassured her. But this time there could be no mistake as to what she had heard. There was no game in Mr. de Crespigny's garden. She was not alone, therefore. There was a man lurking somewhere under the shadow of the evergreens.

She stopped; clutched the documents that she carried in her breast, and then emerged from the shrubbery on to the lawn, ashamed of her fears.

The man whose presence had alarmed her was, no doubt, one of the servants—the gardener, most likely—and he would admit her to the house and save her any encounter with the maiden sisters.

She looked about the garden, but could see no one. Then, in a low voice, she called to the man by name; but there was no answer.

Lights were burning in Mr. de Crespigny's bedroom, but the windows of the room which the old man called his study, and the windows of his dressing-room, a little apartment between the bed-chamber and the study, were dark.

Eleanor waited a few minutes in the garden, expecting to hear or see one of the servants emerge from the shrubbery; but all was quiet, and she had no alternative except to go round to

the principal door of the house, and take her chance of being admitted.

"I am certain that there was some one close to me," she thought. "It must have been Brooks, the gardener; but how odd that he didn't hear me when I called to him."

The principal entrance to Mr. de Crespigny's house was by a pair of half-glass doors, approached by a double flight of stone steps, either from the right or the left, as might suit the visitor's convenience. It was a handsome entrance; and the plate glass which formed the upper halves of the doors appeared a very slight barrier between the visitor waiting on the broad stone platform without, and the interior of the house. But, for all this, no portcullis of the Middle Ages, no sturdy postern gate of massive oak studded by ponderous iron nails, was ever more impregnable to the besieger than these transparent doors had been under the despotic sway of the rich bachelor's maiden nieces. Despairing poor relations, standing hopeless and desperate without those fatal doors, had been well-nigh tempted to smash the plate-glass, and thus make their way into the citadel. But, as this would have scarcely been a likely method by which to ingratiate themselves

into the favour of a testy old man, the glass remained undamaged; and the hapless kinsfolk of Maurice de Crespigny were fain to keep at a distance, and hope—almost against hope—that he would get tired of his maiden watchers, and revenge himself upon their officiousness by leaving his money away from them.

It was outside these glass doors that Eleanor Monckton stood to-night, with very different feelings in her breast to those which were wont to animate the visitors who came to Woodlands.

She pulled the brass handle of the bell, which was stiff from little usage, and which, after resisting her efforts for a long time, gave way at last with an angry spring that shook the distant clapper with a noisy peal which seemed as if it would have never ceased ringing sharply through the stillness.

But, loud as this peal had been, it was not answered immediately, and Eleanor had time to contemplate the prim furniture of the dimly-lighted hall, the umbrella-stand and barometer, and some marine views of a warlike nature on the walls; pictures in which a De Crespigny of Nelson's time distinguished himself unpleasantly

by the blowing up of some very ugly ships which exploded in blazes of yellow ochre and vermillion, and the bombardment of some equally ugly fortresses in burnt sienna.

A butler, or factotum,—for there was only one male servant in the house, and he was old and unpleasant, and had been cherished by the Misses de Crespigny because of those very qualifications, which were likely to stand in the way of his getting any important legacy,—emerged at last from one of the passages at the back of the hall, and advanced, with indignation and astonishment depicted on his grim features, to the doors before which Eleanor waited, Heaven only knows how impatiently.

"Launcelot Darrell may have come here before me," she thought; "he may be with his uncle now, and may induce him to alter his will. He must be desperate enough to do anything, if he really knows that he is disinherited."

The butler opened one of the hall doors, a very little way, and suspiciously. He took care to plant himself in the aperture in such a manner as would have compelled Eleanor to walk through his body before she could enter the hall; and as the butler was the very reverse of Mr. Pepper's

ghost in consistency, Mrs. Monckton could only parley with him in the faint hope of taking the citadel by capitulation. She did not know that the citadel was already taken, and that an awful guest, to whom neither closely guarded doors nor oaken posterns lined with stoutest iron formed obstacle or hindrance, had entered that quiet mansion before her; she did not know this, nor that the butler only kept her at bay out of the sheer force of habit, and perhaps with a spiteful sense of pleasure in doing battle with would-be legatees.

"I want to see Mr. de Crespigny," Eleanor cried, eagerly; "I want to see him very particularly, if you please. I know that he will see me if you will be so good as to tell him that I am here."

The butler opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so a door opened, and Miss Lavinia de Crespigny appeared. She was very pale, and carried a handkerchief in her hand, which she put to her eyes every now and then; but the eyes were quite dry, and she had not been weeping.

"Who is that?" she exclaimed sharply. "What is the matter, Parker? Why can't you

tell the person that we can see nobody to-night?"

"I was just a-goin' to tell her so," the butler answered; "but it's Mrs. Monckton, and she says she wants to see poor master."

He moved away from the door, as if his responsibility had ceased on the appearance of his mistress, and Eleanor entered the hall.

"Oh, dear Miss Lavinia," she cried, almost breathless in her eagerness, "do let me see your uncle. I know he will not refuse to see me. I am a favourite with him, you know. Please let me see him."

Miss Lavinia de Crespigny applied her handkerchief to her dry eyes before she answered Eleanor's eager entreaty. Then she said very slowly,—

"My beloved uncle departed this life an hour ago. He breathed his last in my arms."

"And in mine," murmured Miss Sarah, who had followed her sister into the hall.

"And I was a-standing by the bedside," observed the butler, with respectful firmness; "and the last words as my blessed master said before you come into the room, Miss Lavinia, was these: 'You've been a good servant, Parker, and you'll

find you're not forgotten.' Yes, Miss, 'You'll find you're not forgotten, Parker,' were his last words."

The two ladies looked very sharply and rather suspiciously at Mr. Parker, as if they were meditating the possibility of that gentleman having fabricated a will constituting himself sole legatee.

"*I* did not hear my dear uncle mention you, Parker," Miss Sarah said, stiffly; "but *we* shall not forget any one he wished to have remembered; you may be sure of that."

Eleanor Monckton stood, silent and aghast, staring straight before her, paralysed, dumbfounded, by the tidings she had just heard.

"Dead!" she murmured at last. "Dead! dead!—before I could see him, before I could tell him—"

She paused, looking round her with a bewildered expression in her face.

"I do not know *why* you should be so eager to see my uncle," said Miss Lavinia, forgetting her assumption of grief, and becoming very genuine in her spiteful feeling towards Eleanor, as a possible rival, "nor do I know *what* you can have had to say to him. But I do know that you have not exhibited very good taste in intruding upon

us at such an hour as this, and, above all, in remaining, now that you hear the sad affliction" —the handkerchief went to the eyes again here— "which has befallen us. If you come here," added Miss Lavinia, suddenly becoming spiteful again, "in the hope of ascertaining how my uncle's money has been left—and it would be only like *some* people to do so—I can give you *no* information upon the subject. The gardener has been sent to Windsor to summon Mr. Lawford's clerk. Mr. Lawford himself started some days ago for New York on business. It's very unlucky that he should be away at such a time, for we put every confidence in him. However, I suppose the clerk will do as well. He will put seals on my uncle's effects, I believe, and nothing will be known about the will until the day of the funeral. But I do not think *you* need trouble yourself upon the subject, my dear Mrs. Monckton, as I perfectly remember my beloved relative telling you very distinctly that he had no idea of leaving you anything except a picture, or something of that kind. We shall be very happy to see that you get the picture," concluded the lady, with frigid politeness.

Eleanor Monckton stood with one hand push-

ing the glossy ripples of auburn hair away from her forehead, and with a look upon her face which the Misses de Crespigny—whose minds had run in one very narrow groove for the last twenty years—could only construe into some disappointment upon the subject of the will. Eleanor recovered her self-command with an effort, as Miss Lavinia finished speaking, and said, very quietly:

"Believe me, I do not want to inherit any of Mr. de Crespigny's property. I am very, very sorry that he is dead, for there was something that I wanted to tell him before he died; something that I ought to have told him long ago. I have been foolish—cowardly—to wait so long."

She said the last words not to the two ladies, but to herself; and then, after a pause, she added, slowly,

"I hope your uncle has left his fortune to you and your sister, Miss Lavinia. Heaven grant that he may have left it so!"

Unfortunately the Misses de Crespigny were in the humour to take offence at anything. The terrible torture of suspense which was gnawing at the heart of each of the dead man's nieces dis-

posed them to be snappish to any one who came in their way. To them, to-night, it seemed as if the earth was peopled by expectant legatees, all eager to dispute for the heritage which by right was theirs.

"We are extremely obliged to you for your good wishes, Mrs. Monckton," Miss Sarah said, with vinegary politeness, "and we can perfectly appreciate their sincerity. *Good* evening."

On this hint, the butler opened the door with a solemn flourish, and the two ladies bowed Eleanor out of the house. The door closed behind her, and she went slowly down the steps, lingering without purpose, entirely bewildered by the turn that events had taken.

"Dead!" she exclaimed, in a half-whisper, "dead! I never thought that he would die so soon. I waited, and waited, thinking that, whenever the time came for me to speak, he would be alive to hear me; and now he is dead, and I have lost my chance; I have lost my one chance of avenging my father's death. The law cannot touch Launcelot Darrell; but this old man had the power to punish him, and would have used that power, if he had known the story of his friend's death. I cannot doubt that. I cannot

doubt that Maurice de Crespigny dearly loved my father."

Eleanor Monckton stopped for a few minutes at the bottom of the steps, trying to collect her senses—trying to think if there was anything more for her to do.

No, there was nothing. The one chance which fortune, by a series of events, not one of which had been of her own contriving, had thrown into her way, was lost. She could do nothing but go quietly home, and wait for the reading of the will, which might, or might not, make Launcelot Darrell the owner of a noble estate.

But then she remembered Richard Thornton's visit to Windsor, and the inferences he had drawn from the meeting between Launcelot and the lawyer's clerk. Richard had most firmly believed that the property was left away from the young man; and Launcelot Darrell's conduct since that day had gone far towards confirming the scene-painter's assertion. There was very little doubt, then, that the will which had been drawn up by Mr. Lawford and witnessed by Gilbert Monckton, was a will that left Maurice de Crespigny's fortune away from Launcelot Darrell. The old man had spoken of a duty which he meant to perform.

Surely he must have alluded to his two nieces' devotion, and the recompense which they had earned by their patient attendance upon him. Such untiring watchers generally succeed in reaping the reward of their labours; and why should it be otherwise in this case?

But then, on the other hand, the old man was fretful and capricious. His nerves had been shattered by a long illness. How often, in the watches of the night, he might have lain awake, pondering upon the disposal of his wealth, and doubtful what to do with it, in his desire to act for the best! It was known that he had made other wills, and had burned them when the humour seized him. He had had ample opportunity for changing his mind. He had very likely destroyed the will witnessed by Gilbert Monckton, in order to make a new one in Launcelot's favour.

Eleanor stood at the bottom of the broad flight of steps, with her hand upon the iron railing, thinking of all this. Then with a regretful sigh, she walked away from the front of the house.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE DEAD.

THE rooms that had been occupied by Maurice de Crespigny were at the back of the house, and Eleanor, returning by the way that she had come, had occasion to pass once more through the garden and shrubbery upon which the windows of these rooms looked.

Mrs. Monckton paused amongst the evergreens that grew near the house, sheltering and darkening the windows with their thick luxuriance. The Venetian shutters outside the windows of the room in which the dead man lay were closed, and the light within shone brightly between the slanting laths.

"Poor old man," Eleanor murmured, as she looked mournfully towards this death-chamber, "he was very good to me; I ought to be sorry for his death."

The evergreens which grew in groups on either

side of the windows made a thick screen, behind which half-a-dozen people might have safely hidden themselves upon this moonless and starless February night. Eleanor lingered for a few moments amongst these clustering laurels before she emerged upon the patch of smooth turf which was scarcely large enough to be dignified with the title of a lawn.

As she lingered, partly because of a regretful tenderness towards the dead man, partly because of that irresolution and uncertainty that had taken possession of her mind from the moment in which she had heard of his death, she was startled once more by the rustling of the branches near her. This time she was not left long in doubt: the rustling of the branches was followed by a hissing whisper, very cautious and subdued, but at the same time very distinct in the stillness; and Eleanor Monckton was not slow to recognise the accent of the French commercial traveller, Monsieur Victor Bourdon.

"The shutters are not fastened," this man whispered; "there is a chance yet, *mon ami*."

The speaker was within two paces of Eleanor, but she was hidden from him by the shrubs. The companion to whom he had spoken was of course

Launcelot Darrell; there could be no doubt of that. But why were these men here? Had the artist come in ignorance of his kinsman's death, and in the hope of introducing himself secretly into the old man's apartments, and thus outmanœuvring the maiden nieces?

As the two men moved nearer one of the windows of the bedchamber, moving very cautiously, but still disturbing the branches as they went, Eleanor drew back, and stood, motionless, almost breathless, close against the blank wall between the long French windows.

In another moment Launcelot Darrell and his companion were standing so close to her, that she could hear their hurried breathing as distinctly as she heard her own. The Frenchman softly drew back one of the Venetian shutters a few inches, and peeped very cautiously through the narrow aperture into the room.

"There is only an old woman there," he whispered, "an old woman, very grey, very respectable; she is asleep, I think; look and see who she is."

Monsieur Bourdon drew back as he spoke, making way for Launcelot Darrell. The young man obeyed his companion, but in a half-sulky,

half-unwilling fashion, which was very much like his manner on the Parisian Boulevard.

"Who is it?" whispered the Frenchman, as Launcelot leant forward and peered into the lighted room.

"Mrs. Jepcott, my uncle's housekeeper."

"Is she a friend of yours, or an enemy?"

"A friend, I think. I know that she hates my aunts. She would rather serve me than serve them."

"Good. We are not going to trust Mrs. Jepcott; but it's as well to know that she is friendly towards us. Now, listen to me, my friend, we must have the key."

"I suppose we must," muttered Launcelot Darrell, very sulkily.

"You suppose we must! Bah!" whispered the Frenchman, with intense scornfulness of manner. "It is likely we should draw back, after having gone so far as we have gone, and made such promises as we have made. It is like you Englishmen, to turn cowards at the very last, in any difficult business like this. You are very brave and very great so long as you can make a great noise about your honour, and your courage, and your loyalty; so long as the drums are

beating and the flags flying, and all the world looking on to admire you. But the moment there is anything of difficult—anything of a little hazardous, or anything of criminal, perhaps,—you draw back, you have fear. Bah! I have no patience with you. You are a great nation, but you have never produced a great impostor. Your Perkin Warbecks, your Stuart Pretenders, they are all the same. They ride up hills with forty thousand men, and,"—here Monsieur Bourdon hissed out a very big French oath, to give strength to his assertion,—"when they get to the top they can do nothing better than ride down again."

It is not to be supposed that, in so critical a situation as that in which the two men had placed themselves, the Frenchman would have said all this without a purpose. He knew Launcelot Darrell, and he knew that ridicule was the best spur with which to urge him on when he was inclined to come to a stand-still. The young man's pride took fire at his companion's scornful banter.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to go into that room and look for your uncle's keys. I would do it, and perhaps do

it better than you, but if that woman woke and found me there, she would rouse the house; if she wakes up and sees you, any sentimental story of your desire to look for the last time upon your kinsman and benefactor will satisfy her and stop her mouth. *You* must search for the keys, Monsieur Robert Lance, pardon!—Monsieur Launcelot Darrell."

The young man made no immediate answer to this speech. He stood close to the window, with the half-open shutter in his hand, and Eleanor could see, by the motion of this shutter, that he was trembling.

"I can't do it, Bourdon," he gasped, after a long pause; "I can't do it. To go up to that dead man's bed-side and *steal* his keys. It seems like an act of sacrilege—I—I—*can't* do it."

The commercial traveller shrugged his shoulders so high that it almost seemed he never meant to bring them down again.

"Good!" he said, "*C'est fini!* Live and die a pauper, Monsieur Darrell, but never again ask me to help you in a great scheme. Good night."

The Frenchman made a show of walking off, but went slowly, and gave Launcelot plenty of time to stop him.

"Stay, Bourdon," the young man muttered; "don't be a fool. If you mean to stand by me in this business, you must have a little patience. I'll do what must be done, of course, however unpleasant it may be. I've no reason to feel any great compunction about the old man. He hasn't shown so much love for me that I need have any very sentimental affection for him. I'll go in and look for the keys."

He had opened the shutter to its widest extent, and he put his hand upon the window as he spoke, but the Frenchman checked him.

"What are you going to do?" asked Monsieur Bourdon.

"I'm going to look for the keys."

"Not that way. If you open that window the cold air will blow into the room and awaken the old woman—what you call her—Madame Jepcott. No, you must take off your boots, and go in through one of the windows of the other rooms. We saw just now that those rooms are empty. Come with me."

The two men moved away towards the windows of the sitting-room. Eleanor crept to the Venetian shutters which Launcelot had closed, and, drawing one of them a little way open, looked into the

room in which the dead man lay. The housekeeper, Mrs. Jepcott, sat in a roomy easy-chair, close to the fire, which burned brightly, and had evidently been very lately replenished. The old woman's head had fallen back upon the cushion of her chair, and the monotonous regularity of her snores gave sufficient evidence of the soundness of her slumbers. Voluminous curtains of dark green damask were drawn closely round the massive four-post bed; a thick wax candle, in an old-fashioned silver candlestick, burned upon the table by the bedside, and a pair of commoner candles, in brass candlesticks, brought, no doubt, from the housekeeper's room, stood upon a larger table near the fireplace.

Nothing had been disturbed since the old man's death. The maiden ladies had made a merit of this.

"We shall disturb nothing," Miss Lavinia, who was the more loquacious of the two, had said; "we shall not pry about or tamper with any of our beloved relative's effects. You will take care of everything in your master's room, Jepcott; we place everything under your charge, and you will see that nothing is touched; you will take care that not so much as a pocket-handkerchief shall

be disturbed until Mr. Lawford's clerk comes from Windsor."

In accordance with these directions, everything had remained exactly as it had been left at the moment of Maurice de Crespigny's death. The practised sick-nurse had retired, after doing her dismal duty; the stiffening limbs had been composed in the last calm sleep; the old man's eyelids had been closed upon the sightless eyeballs; the curtains had been drawn; and that was all.

The medicine bottles, the open Bible, the crumbled handkerchiefs, the purse, and paper-knife, and spectacles, and keys, lying in disorder upon the table by the bed, had not been touched. Eager as the dead man's nièces were to know the contents of his will, the thought of obtaining that knowledge by any surreptitious means had never for one moment entered into the head of either. They were conscientious ladies, who attended church three times upon a Sunday, and who would have recoiled aghast from before the mere thought of any infraction of the law.

Eleanor, with the Venetian shutter a very little way open, and with her face close against the window, stood looking into the lighted room, and waiting for Launcelot Darrell to appear.

The great four-post bedstead stood opposite the windows, the door was on Eleanor's right hand. About five minutes elapsed before there was any sign of the intruder's coming. Then the door was opened, very slowly, and Launcelot Darrell crept into the room.

His face was almost livid, and he trembled violently. At first he looked helplessly about him, as if paralysed by fear. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the cold perspiration from his forehead, still looking helplessly right and left.

But presently the Frenchman's head appeared round the edge of the door, which Launcelot Darrell had left a little way open, a fat little hand pointed to the table by the bed, and Monsieur Bourdon's hissing whisper vibrated in the room.

"V'là,—the table—the table—straight before you."

Following this indication, the young man began with trembling hands to search amongst the disorder of the littered table. He had not occasion to seek very long for what he wanted. The dead man's keys lay under one of the handkerchiefs. They jingled a little as Launcelot took them up,

and Mrs. Jepcott stirred in her sleep, but she did not open her eyes.

"Come away, come!" whispered the Frenchman, as Launcelot stood with the keys in his hand, as if too much bewildered even to know that his purpose was accomplished. He obeyed Monsieur Bourdon, and hurried from the room. He had taken off his boots at his companion's instigation, and his stockinged feet made no sound upon the thick carpet.

"What is he going to do with those keys?" Eleanor thought. "If he knows the contents of the will, as Richard believed, what good can the keys be to him?"

She still looked into the lighted bed-chamber, wondering what could happen next. Where had Launcelot Darrell gone, and what was he going to do with the keys? She crept along by the side of the house, past the window of the dressing-room, which was still dark, and stopped when she came to the window of the old man's study. All the windows upon this floor were in the same style—long French windows, opening to the ground, and they were all sheltered by Venetian shutters. The shutters of the study were closed, but the window was open, and through

the bars of the shutters Eleanor saw a faint glimmer of light.

She drew the shutter nearest her a little way open, and looked into the room. The light that she had seen came from a very small bull's-eye lantern, which the Frenchman held in his hand. He was standing over Launcelot Darrell, who was on his knees before the lower half of an old-fashioned *secrétaire*, at which Mr. de Crespigny had been in the habit of writing, and in which he had kept papers.

The lower half of this *secrétaire* contained a great many little drawers, which were closed in by a pair of inlaid ebony doors. The doors were open now, and Launcelot Darrell was busy examining the contents of the drawers one by one. His hands still trembled, and he went to work slowly and awkwardly. The Frenchman, whose nerves appeared in no way shaken, contrived to throw the light of the bull's-eye always upon the papers in the young man's hand.

"Have you found what you want?" he asked.

"No, there's nothing yet; nothing but old leases, receipts, letters, bills."

"Be quick! Remember we have to put the

keys back, and to get away. Have you the other ready?"

"Yes."

They spoke in whispers, but their whispers were perhaps more distinct than their ordinary tones would have been. Eleanor could hear every word they said.

There was a long pause, during which Launcelot Darrell opened and shut several drawers, taking a hurried survey of their contents. Presently he uttered a half-smothered cry.

"You've got it?" exclaimed the Frenchman.

"Yes."

"Put in the substitute then, and lock the cabinet."

Launcelot Darrell threw the document which he had taken from the drawer upon a chair near him, and took another paper from his pocket. He put this second paper in the place from which he had taken the first, and then shut the drawer, and closed and locked the doors of the cabinet. He did all this in nervous haste, and neither he nor his companion perceived that a third paper, very much like the first in shape and size, had fallen out of one of the drawers and lay upon the carpet before the cabinet.

Now, for the first time, Eleanor Monckton began to comprehend the nature of the conspiracy which she had witnessed. Launcelot Darrell and his accomplice had substituted a fictitious paper for the real will signed by Maurice de Crespigny and witnessed by Gilbert Monckton and the lawyer's clerk. The genuine document was that which Launcelot Darrell had flung upon the chair by the side of the *secrétaire*.

CHAPTER IV.

A BRIEF TRIUMPH.

ELEANOR MONCKTON'S first impulse was to rush into the room and denounce Launcelot Darrell in the presence of those who would be sure to come in answer to her call. He would be scarcely likely to find much mercy at the hands of his aunts: he would stand before them a detected wretch, capable of any crime, of any treachery, for the furtherance of his own interest.

But a second impulse, as rapid as the first, restrained the impetuous girl. She wanted to know the end, she wanted to see what these two plotters would do next. Under the influence of her desire to rush into the room, she had moved forward a few paces, rustling the leaves about her as she stirred. The Frenchman's acute hearing had detected that rustling sound.

"Quick, quick," he whispered; "take the keys back, there is some one in the garden."

Launcelot Darrell had risen from his knees. The door between the study and the dressing-room had been left ajar; the young man pushed it open, and hurried away with the keys in his hand. Victor Bourdon closed his lantern, and came to the window. He thrust aside the Venetian shutters, and stepped out into the garden. Eleanor crouched down with her back flat against the wall, completely sheltered by the laurels. The Frenchman commenced his search amongst the bushes on the right of the window, Eleanor's hiding-place was on the left. This gave her a moment's breathing time.

"The will!" she thought in that one moment, "they have left the genuine will upon the chair by the cabinet. *If* I could get that!"

The thought had flashed like lightning through her brain. Reckless in her excitement, she rose from her crouching position, and slid rapidly and noiselessly across the threshold of the open window into the study, before Victor Bourdon had finished his examination of the shrubs on the right.

Her excitement seemed to intensify every sense. The only light in the room was a faint ray which came across the small intermediate

chamber from the open door of Maurice de Crespigny's bed-room. This light was very little, but the open door was opposite the cabinet, and what light there was fell upon the very spot towards which Eleanor's dilated eyes looked. She could see the outline of the paper on the chair; she could see the other paper on the floor, faint and grey in the dim glimmer from the distant candles.

She snatched the will from the chair, and thrust it into the pocket of her dress; she picked up the other paper from the floor, and placed it on the chair. Then, with her face and figure obscured in the loose cloak that shrouded her, she went back into the garden.

As she drew back into the shelter of the laurels she felt a man's garments brushing against her own, and a man's hot breath upon her cheek. The Frenchman had passed her so closely that it was almost impossible he could have failed to perceive her presence: and yet he had seemed utterly unconscious of it.

Launcelot Darrell came back to the study almost the moment after Eleanor had left it. He was breathing quickly, and stopped to wipe his forehead once more with his handkerchief.

"Bourdon!" he exclaimed, in a loud whisper, "Bourdon, where are you?"

The Frenchman crossed the threshold of the window as the young man called to him.

"I have been on the look-out for spies," he said.

"Have you seen any one?"

"No; I fancy it was a false alarm."

"Come, then," said Launcelot Darrell, "we have been luckier than I thought we should be."

"Hadn't you better unlock that door before we leave?" asked Monsieur Bourdon, pointing to the door which communicated with the other part of the house. Launcelot had locked it on first entering the study, and had thus secured himself from any surprise in that direction. The two men were going away when Monsieur Bourdon stopped suddenly.

"You've forgotten something, my friend," he whispered, laying his hand on Launcelot's shoulder.

"What?"

"The will, the genuine will," answered the Frenchman, pointing to the chair. "It would be a clever thing to leave that behind, eh!"

Launcelot started, and put his hand to his forehead.

"I must be mad," he muttered; "this business is too much for my brain. Why did you lead me into it, Bourdon? Are you the Devil, that you must always prompt me to some new mischief?"

"You shall ask me that next week, my friend, when you are the master of this house. Get that paper there, and come away: unless you want to stop till your maiden aunts make their appearance."

Launcelot Darrell snatched up the paper which Eleanor had put upon the chair by the cabinet. He was going to thrust it into his breast-pocket, when the Frenchman took it away from him.

"You don't particularly want to keep that document; or to drop it anywhere about the garden; do you? We'll burn it, if it's all the same to you, and save them all trouble at—what you call your law court—Common doctors, Proctor's Commons, eh?"

Monsieur Bourdon had put his bull's-eye lantern in his coat-pocket, after looking for spies amongst the evergreens. He now produced a box of fusees, and setting one of them alight, watched it fizz

and sparkle for a moment, and then held it beneath the corner of the document in his left hand.

The paper was slow to catch fire, and Monsieur Bourdon had occasion to light another fusee before he succeeded in doing more than scorching it. But it blazed up by-and-by, and by the light of the blaze Eleanor Monckton saw the eager faces of the two men. Launcelot Darrell's livid countenance was almost like that of a man who looks on at an assassination. The commercial traveller watched the slow burning of the document with a smile upon his face—a smile of triumph, as it seemed to Eleanor Monckton.

"V'là!" he exclaimed, as the paper dropped, a frail sheet of tinder, from his hand, and fluttered slowly to the ground. "V'là!" he cried, stamping upon the feathery grey ashes; "so much for that; and now our little scheme of to-night is safe, I fancy, my friend."

Launcelot Darrell drew a long breath.

"Thank God it's over," he muttered. "I wouldn't go through this business again for twenty fortunes."

Eleanor, still crouching upon the damp grass close against the wall, waited for the two men to

away. She waited, with her hands clasped upon her heart; thinking of her triumph.

The vengeance had come at last. That which she had said to Richard Thornton was about to be fulfilled. The law of the land had no power to punish Launcelot Darrell for the cowardly and treacherous act that had led to an old man's most miserable death: but the traitor had by a new crime placed himself at the mercy of the law.

"The will he has placed in the cabinet is a forgery," she thought; "and I have the real will in my pocket. He cannot escape me now,—he cannot escape me now! His fate is in my hands."

The two men had walked past the laurels out on to the grass-plat. Eleanor rose from her crouching position, rustling the branches as she did so. At the same moment she heard voices in the distance, and saw a light gleaming through the leaves.

One of the voices that she had heard was her husband's.

"So much the better," she thought. "I will tell him what Launcelot Darrell is. I will tell him to-night."

The voices and the lights came nearer, and she heard Gilbert Monckton say:

"Impossible, Miss Sarah. Why should my wife stop here? She must have gone back to Tolldale; and I have been unlucky enough to miss her on the way."

The lawyer had scarcely spoken when, by the light of the lantern which he held, he saw Launcelot Darrell making off into the shrubbery that surrounded the grass-plat. The young man had not succeeded in escaping from the open space into this friendly shelter before Gilbert Monckton perceived him. Monsieur Bourdon, perhaps better accustomed to take to his heels, had been more fortunate, and had plunged in amongst the evergreens at the first sound of the lawyer's voice.

"Darrell!" cried Mr. Monckton, "what in Heaven's name brings you here?"

The young man stood for a few moments, irresolute, and sullen-looking.

"I've as good a right to be here as any one else, I suppose," he said. "I heard of my uncle's death—and—and—I came to ascertain if there was any truth in the report.

"You heard of my beloved uncle's death!"

cried Miss Sarah de Crespigny, peering sharply at her nephew from under the shadow of a pent-house-like garden-hood, in which she had invested herself before venturing into the night-air. "How *could* you have heard of the sad event? My sister and I gave special orders that no report should go abroad until to-morrow morning."

Mr. Darrell did not care to say that one of the Woodlands servants was in his pay; and that the same servant, being no other than Brooks the gardener, had galloped over to Hazlewood, to communicate the tidings of his master's death, before starting for Windsor.

"I *did* hear of it," Launcelot said, "and that's enough. I came to ascertain if it was true."

"But you were going away from the house when I saw you!" said Mr. Monckton, rather suspiciously.

"I was not going away from the house, for I had not been to the house," Launcelot answered in the same tone as before.

He spake in a sulky grudging manner, because he knew that he was telling a deliberate lie. He was a man who always did wrong acts under protest, as being forced to do them by the injustice

of the world; and held society responsible for all his errors.

"Have you seen my wife?" Gilbert asked, still suspiciously.

"No. I have only this moment come. I have not seen anybody."

"I *must* have missed her," muttered the lawyer, with an anxious air. "I must have missed her between this and Tolldale. Nobody saw her leave the house. She went out without leaving any message, and I guessed at once that she had come up here. It's very odd."

"It *is* very odd!" Miss Sarah repeated, with spiteful emphasis. "I must confess that for my own part I do not see what motive Mrs. Monckton could have had for rushing up here in the dead of the night."

The time which Miss Sarah de Crespigny spoke of as the dead of the night had been something between ten and eleven o'clock. It was now past eleven.

The lawyer and Miss de Crespigny walked slowly along the gravelled pathway that led from the grass-plat and shrubbery to the other side of the house. Launcelot Darrell went with them, lounging by his aunt's side, with his head down,

and his hands in his pockets, stopping now and then to kick the pebbles from his pathway.

It was impossible to imagine anything more despicable than this young man's aspect. Hating himself for what he had done; hating the man who had prompted him to do it; angry against the very workings of Providence—since by his reasoning it was Providence, or his Destiny, or some power or other against which he had ample ground for rebellion, that had caused all the mischief and dishonour of his life—he went unwillingly to act out the part which he had taken upon himself, and to do his best to throw Gilbert Monckton off the scent.

His mind was too much disturbed for him to be able clearly to realise the danger of his position. To have been seen there was ruin—perhaps! If by-and-by any doubts should arise as to the validity of the will that would be found in Maurice de Crespigny's *secrétaire*, would it not be remembered that he, Launcelot Darrell, had been seen lurking about the house on the night of the old man's death, and had been only able to give a very lame explanation of his motives for being there. He thought of this as he walked by his aunt's side. He thought of this, and began

to wonder if it might not be possible to undo what had been done? No, it was impossible. The crime had been committed. A step had been taken which could never be retraced, for Victor Bourdon had burned the real will.

"Curse his officiousness," thought the young man. "I could have undone it all but for that."

As the lawyer and his two companions reached the angle of the house on their way to the front entrance, whence Mr. Monckton and Miss de Crespigny had come into the garden, a dark figure shrouded in a loose cloak emerged from amidst the shrubs by the windows of the dead man's apartments, and approached them.

"Who is that?" cried the lawyer suddenly. His heart began to beat violently as he asked the question. It was quite a supererogatory question; for he knew well enough that it was his wife who stood before him.

"It is I, Gilbert," Eleanor said quietly.

"You here, Mrs. Monckton!" exclaimed her husband, in a harsh voice, that seemed to ring through the air like the vibration of metal that has been struck,—"you here, hiding in this shrubbery!"

"Yes, I came here—how long ago, Miss Sarah? It seems half a century to me."

"You came here exactly twenty minutes ago, Mrs. Monckton," Miss de Crespigny answered icily.

"And by a really remarkable coincidence," cried Gilbert Monckton, in the same unnatural voice in which he had spoken before, "Mr. Darrell happens to be here too: only I must do you the justice to say, Mrs. Monckton, that *you* appear less discomposed than the gentleman. Ladies always have the advantage of us; they can carry off these things so easily; deception seems to come natural to them."

"Deception!" repeated Eleanor.

What did he mean? Why was he angry with her? She wondered at his manner as she walked with him to the house. No suspicion of the real nature of her husband's feelings entered her mind. The absorbing idea of her life was the desire to punish her father's destroyer; and how could she imagine that her husband was tortured by jealous suspicions of this man: of this man, who of all the living creatures upon the earth was most hateful to her? How could she,—knowing her own feelings, and taking

it for granted that these feelings were more or less obvious to other people, — how could she imagine the state of Gilbert Monckton's mind.

She went into the hall with her husband, followed by Miss Sarah de Crespigny and Launcelot Darrell, and from the hall into the sitting-room usually occupied by the two ladies. A lamp burned brightly upon the centre table, and Miss Lavinia de Crespigny sat near it; with some devotional book in her hand. I think she tried her best to be devout, and to employ herself with serious reflections upon the dread event that had so lately happened; but the fatal power of the old man's wealth was stronger than any holier influence, and I fear that Miss Lavinia's thoughts very often wandered away from the page on which her eyes were fixed, into sundry intricate calculations of the cumulative interest upon Exchequer bills, India five per cents., and Great Western Railway shares.

"I must have an explanation of this business," Mr. Monckton said: "it is time that we should all understand each other. There has been too much mystification, and I am most heartily tired of it."

He walked to the fireplace and leaned his elbow upon the marble chimney-piece. From this position he commanded a view of every one in the room. Launcelot Darrell flung himself into a chair by the table, nearly opposite his aunt Lavinia. He did not trouble himself to notice this lady, nor did he bow to Eleanor; he sat with his elbow resting upon the arm of his chair, his chin in the palm of his hand, and he employed himself by biting his nails and beating his heel upon the carpet. He was still thinking as he had thought in the garden, "If I could only undo what I have done. If I could only undo the work of the last quarter of an hour, and stand right with the world again."

But in this intense desire that had taken possession of Launcelot Darrell's mind there was mingled no regretful horror of the wickedness of what he had done; no remorseful sense of the great injustice which he had plotted; no wish to atone or to restore. It was selfishness alone that influenced his every thought. He wanted to put *himself* right. He hated this new position, which for the last few minutes he had occupied for the first time in his life; the position of a deliberate criminal, amenable to the laws by which the com-

monest felons are tried, likely to suffer as the commonest felons suffer.

It seemed to him as if his brain had been paralysed until now; it seemed to him as if he had acted in a stupor or a dream; and that he now for the first time comprehended the nature of the deed which he had done, and was able to foresee the possible consequences of his own act.

"I have committed forgery," he thought. "If my crime is discovered I shall be sent to Bermuda to work amongst gangs of murderous ruffians till I drop down dead. *If* my crime is discovered! How shall I ever be safe from discovery, when I am at the mercy of the wretches who helped me."

Eleanor threw off her cloak, but she refused to sit down in the chair which Miss Sarah offered her. She stood divided by the width of half the room from her husband, with her face fronting his, in the full glare of the lamplight. Her large grey eyes were bright with excitement, her cheeks were flushed, her hair fell loosely about her face, brown in the shadow, and glittering like ruddy gold in the light.

In all the beauty of her girlhood, from the hour in which Gilbert Monckton had first seen her until to-night, she had never looked so

beautiful as she looked now. The sense that she had triumphed, the thought that she held the power to avenge her father's death, lent an unnatural brilliancy to her loveliness. She was no longer an ordinary woman, only gifted with the earthly charms of lovely womanhood: she was a splendid Nemesis, radiant with a supernatural beauty.

CHAPTER V.

LOST.

"You asked me why I came here to-night," she said, looking at her husband. "I will tell you, Gilbert: but I must tell you a long story first, almost all the story of my life."

Her voice, resonant and musical, roused Launcelot Darrell from his gloomy abstraction. He looked up at Eleanor, and for the first time began to wonder how and why she had come there. They had met her in the garden. Why had she been there? What had she been doing there? Could it be possible that she had played the spy upon him? No! Surely there could be no fear of that? What reason should *she* have for suspecting or watching him? *That* terror was too cowardly, too absurd, he thought; but such foolish and unnecessary fears would be the perpetual torment of his life henceforward.

"You remember, Gilbert," Eleanor continued,

"that when I promised to be your wife, I told you my real name, and asked you to keep that name a secret from the people in this house; and from Launcelot Darrell."

"Yes," answered Mr. Monckton, "I remember."

Even in the midst of the tortures which arose out of his jealousy and suspicion, and which to-night had reached their climax, and had taken entire possession of the lawyer's mind, there was some half-doubtful feeling of wonder at Eleanor's calm and self-assured manner.

And yet she was deceiving him. He knew that. He had long ago determined that this second hazard of his life was to result in ignominious failure, like the first. He had been deceived before; gulled, hoodwinked, fooled, jilted: and the traitress had smiled in his face, with the innocent smile of a guileless child. Eleanor was perhaps even more skilled in treachery than that first traitress; but that was all.

"I will not be deluded by her again," he thought, as he looked gloomily at the beautiful face opposite to him: "*nothing* she can say shall make me her dupe again."

"Shall I tell you why I asked you to keep that secret for me, Gilbert?" continued Eleanor; "I

did so because I had a motive for coming back to the neighbourhood of this place. A motive that was stronger than my love for you—though I did love you, Gilbert, better than I thought; if I thought at all of anything except that other motive which was the one purpose of my life."

Mr. Monckton's upper lip curled scornfully. Love him! That was too poor a fancy. What had he ever been but a dupe and a cat's-paw for a false woman; fooled and cheated many years ago in his early manhood; fooled and cheated to-day in his prime of life. He smiled contemptuously at the thought of his own folly.

"Launcelot Darrell," cried Eleanor, suddenly, in an altered voice, "shall I tell *you* why I was so eager to come back to this neighbourhood? Shall I tell you why I wanted the secret of my name kept from you and from your kindred?"

The young man lifted his head and looked at Eleanor. Wonder and terror were both expressed in his countenance. He wondered why Gilbert Monckton's wife addressed him with such earnestness. He was afraid without knowing what he feared.

"I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Monckton," he faltered. "What could I have to do

with your false name,—or your coming back to this place?"

"EVERYTHING!" cried Eleanor: "it was to be near you that I came back here."

"I thought as much," muttered the lawyer, under his breath.

"It was to be near you that I came back," Eleanor repeated; "it was to be near you, Launcelot Darrell, that I was so eager to come back: so eager, that I would have stooped to any stratagem, encountered any risk, if by so doing I could have hastened my return. It was for this that I took the most solemn step a woman can take, without stopping to think of its solemnity. It was to deceive you that I kept my name a secret. It was to denounce you as the wretch who cheated a helpless old man out of the money that was not his own, and thus drove him to a shameful and a sinful death, that I came here. I have watched and waited long for this moment. It has come at last. Thank Heaven, it has come at last!"

Launcelot Darrell rose suddenly from his chair. His white face was still turned towards Eleanor; his eyes were fixed in a stare of horror. At first, perhaps, he contemplated rushing out of the

room, and getting away from this woman, who had recalled the sin of the past, at a moment when his brain was maddened by the crime of the present. But he stopped, fascinated by some irresistible power in the beautiful face before him. Eleanor stood between the coward and the door. He could not pass her.

"You know who I am now, Launcelot Darrell, and you know how much mercy you can expect from me," this girl continued, in the clear, ringing voice in which she had first addressed her enemy. "You remember the eleventh of August. You remember the night upon which you met my father upon the Boulevard. I stood by his side upon that night. I was hanging upon his arm, when you and your vile associate tempted him away from me. Heaven knows how dearly I loved him; Heaven knows how happily I looked forward to a life in which I might be with him and work for him. Heaven only knows how happily that bright dream might have been realised—but for you—but for you. May an old man's sin rest upon your head. May a daughter's blighted hope rest upon your head. You can guess now why I am here to-night, and what I have been doing; and you can guess, perhaps,

what mercy you have to expect from George Vane's daughter."

"George Vane's daughter!"

Sarah and Lavinia de Crespigny lifted up their hands and eyes in mute dismay. Was this woman, this viper, who had gained access to the very heart of the citadel which they had guarded so jealously, the very creature who of all others they would have kept remote from the dead man?

No! it was impossible. Neither of Maurice de Crespigny's nieces had ever heard of the birth of George Vane's youngest child. The old man had received tidings of the little girl's advent in a letter sent by stealth, and had kept the intelligence a secret.

"It is too absurd!" Miss Lavinia exclaimed; "George Vane's youngest daughter is Hortensia Bannister, and she must be at least five-and-thirty years of age."

Launcelot Darrell knew better than this. *He* could recall a dismal scene that had occurred in the pale grey light of an August morning. He could remember a white-haired old man, sitting amidst the sordid splendour of a second-rate coffee-house, crying about his youngest daughter, and bewailing the loss of the money that was to

have paid for his darling's education; a wretched, broken-hearted old man, who had held his trembling hands aloft, and cursed the wretch who had cheated him.

He could see the figure now, with the shaking hands lifted high. He could see the wrinkled face, very old and worn, in that grey, morning light, and tears streaming from the faded blue eyes. He had lived under the shadow of that curse ever since, and it seemed as if it was coming home to him to-night.

"I am Eleanor Vane," Gilbert Monckton's wife said, in answer to Miss Lavinia. "I am Hortensia Bannister's half-sister. It was because of her foolish pride that I came to Hazlewood under a false name. It was in order to be revenged upon Launcelot Darrell that I have since kept my real name a secret."

Eleanor Vane! Eleanor Vane! Could it be true? Of all whom Launcelot Darrell had reason to fear, this Eleanor Vane was the most to be dreaded. If he had never wronged her father, even if he had not been indirectly the cause of the old man's death, he would still have had reason to fear Eleanor Vane. He knew what that reason was, and he dropped back into his chair, livid and

trembling, as he had trembled when he stole the keys from his dead uncle's bedside.

"Maurice de Crespigny and my father were bosom friends," continued Eleanor. Her voice changed as she spoke of her father, and the light in her face faded as a tender shadow stole over her countenance. She could not mention her father's name without tenderness, speak of him when or where she might. "They were bosom friends, everybody here knows that; and my poor dear father had a foolish fancy that if Mr. de Crespigny died before him, he would inherit this house and estate, and that he would be rich once more, and that we should be very happy together. *I* never thought that."

Launcelot Darrell looked up with a strange, eager glance, but said nothing. The sisters, however, could not suffer Eleanor's words to pass without remark.

"You never thought that; oh dear no, I dare say not," Miss Lavinia observed.

"Of course you never entered this house with any mercenary ideas upon the subject of my dear uncle's will," Miss Sarah exclaimed, with biting irony.

"I never built any hope upon my dear father's

fancy," resumed Eleanor, so indifferent to the remarks of the two ladies that it seemed as if they had been unheard by her; "but I humoured it as I would have humoured any fancy of his, however foolish. But after his death I remembered that Mr. de Crespigny had been his friend, and I only waited to convince myself of that man's guilt"—she pointed to Launcelot Darrell as she spoke—"before I denounced him to his great-uncle. I thought that my father's old friend would listen to me, and knowing what had been done, would never let a traitor inherit his wealth. I thought that by this means I should be revenged upon the man who caused my father's death. I heard to-day that Mr. de Crespigny had not long to live; and when I came here to-night I came with the intention of telling him the real character of the man who was perhaps to inherit his fortune."

The maiden ladies looked at each other. It would not have been a bad thing, perhaps, after all, if Eleanor had arrived in time to see the dying man. It was a pity that Maurice de Crespigny should have died in ignorance of his nephew's character, when there was just a chance that he might have left a will in that nephew's favour.

But on the other hand, George Vane's daughter was even a more formidable person than Launcelot. Who could tell how she might have contrived to tamper with the old man?

"I have no doubt you wished to denounce Mr. Darrell; and to denounce us, too, for the matter of that, I dare say," observed Miss Sarah, "in order that you yourself might profit by my uncle's will."

"*I* profit!" cried Eleanor; "what should I want with the poor old man's money?"

"My wife is rich enough to be above any suspicion of that kind, Miss de Crespigny," Gilbert Monckton said, proudly.

"I came too late," Eleanor said; "I came too late to see my father's friend, but not too late for what I have so long prayed for—revenge upon my father's destroyer. Look at your sister's son, Miss de Crespigny. Look at him, Miss Lavinia; you have good reason to be proud of him. He has been a liar and a traitor from first to last; and to-night he has advanced from treachery to crime. The law could not punish him for the cruelty that killed a helpless old man: the law can punish him for that which he has done to-night, for he has committed a crime."

"A crime!"

"Yes. He has crept like a thief into the house in which his uncle lies dead, and has introduced some document—a will of his own fabrication, no doubt—in the place of the genuine will left in Mr. de Crespigny's private *secrétaire*."

"How do *you* know this, Eleanor?" cried Gilbert Monckton.

"I know it because I was outside the window of the study when he changed the papers in the cabinet, and because I have the real will in my possession."

"It is a lie!" shouted Launcelot Darrell, starting to his feet, "a damnable lie, the real will——"

"Was burnt, as you think, Mr. Darrell; but you are mistaken. The document which your friend Monsieur Victor Bourdon burnt was a paper which you dropped out of the *secrétaire* while you were searching for the will."

"And where is the genuine document, Eleanor?" Gilbert asked.

"Here," answered his wife, triumphantly.

She put her hand into her pocket. It was empty. The will was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

AT SEA.

THE will was gone. Eleanor tried to think how or where she could have lost it. It might have dropped from her pocket, perhaps. That was the only solution of the mystery that presented itself to her mind. The open pocket of her dress might have been caught by one of the laurel boughs as she crouched upon the ground, and when she rose the paper had dropped out. There was no other way in which she *could* have lost it. She had been so absorbed in the watch she had kept on Launcelot Darrell, as to forget the value of the document which she had thrust carelessly into her pocket. Her father's letter and Launcelot Darrell's sketch were still safe in the bosom of her dress; but the will, the genuine will, in place of which the young man had introduced some fabrication of his own, was gone.

"Let me see this will, Eleanor," Gilbert

Monckton said, advancing to his wife. Although she had been the most skilful actress, the most accomplished deceiver amongst all womankind, her conduct to-night could not be all acting, it could not be all deception. She did not love him: she had confessed that, very plainly. She did not love him; and she had only married him in order to serve a purpose of her own. But then, on the other hand, if her passionate words were to be believed in, she did not love Launcelot Darrell. There was some comfort in that. "Let me see the will, Eleanor," he repeated, as his wife stared at him blankly, in the first shock of her discovery.

"I can't find it," she said, hopelessly. "It's gone; it's lost. Oh, for pity's sake, go out into the garden and look for it. I must have dropped it amongst the evergreens outside Mr. de Crespigny's rooms. Pray go and look for it."

"I will," the lawyer said, taking up his hat and walking towards the door of the room.

But Miss Lavinia de Crespigny stopped him.

"No, Mr. Monckton," she said; "pray don't go out into the night air. Parker is the proper person to look for this document."

She rang the bell, which was answered by the old butler.

"Has Brooks come back from Windsor?" she asked.

"No, miss, not yet."

"A paper has been dropped in the garden, Parker, somewhere amongst the evergreens, outside my uncle's rooms. Will you take a lantern, and go and look for it?"

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Miss Sarah, "Brooks has been a very long time going from here to Windsor and back again. I wish Mr. Lawford's clerk were come. The place would be taken care of then, and we should have no further anxiety.

The lady looked suspiciously from her nephew to Eleanor, and from Eleanor to Gilbert Monckton. She did not know whom to trust, or whom most to fear. Launcelot Darrell sat before her, biting savagely at his nails, and with his head bent upon his breast. Eleanor had sunk into the chair nearest her, utterly dumbfounded by the loss of the will.

"You need not fear that we shall long intrude upon you, Miss de Crespigny," Gilbert Monckton said. "My wife has made an accusation against a person in this room. It is only right, in your interest, and for the justification of her truth and

honour, that this business should be investigated —and immediately."

"The will *must* be found," Eleanor cried; "it *must* have fallen from my pocket in the shrubbery."

Launcelot Darrell said nothing. He waited the issue of the search that was being made. If the will was found, he was prepared to repudiate it; for there was no other course left to him. He hated this woman, who had suddenly arisen before him as an enemy and denouncer, who had recalled to him the bitter memory of his first great dishonour, and who had detected him in the commission of his first crime. He hated Eleanor, and was ready to sacrifice her to his own safety.

He lifted his head, presently, and looked about him with a scornful laugh.

"Is this a farce, or a conspiracy, Mrs. Monckton?" he asked. "Do you expect to invalidate my great-uncle's genuine will—wherever that will may happen to be found—by the production of some document dropped by you in the garden, and which has, very likely, never been inside this house, much less in my uncle's possession? You surely don't expect any one to believe your pretty, romantic story, of a suicide in Paris, and

a midnight scene at Woodlands? It would be an excellent paragraph for a hard-up penny-a-liner, but, really, for any other purpose—"

"Take care, Mr. Darrell," Gilbert Monckton said quietly, "you will gain nothing by insolence. If I do not resent your impertinence to my wife, it is because I begin to believe that you are so despicable a scoundrel as to be unworthy of an honest man's anger. You had much better hold your tongue."

There was no particular eloquence in these last few words, but there was something in the lawyer's tone that effectually silenced Launcelot Darrell. Mr. Monckton's cane lay upon a chair by the fire-place, and while speaking he had set down his hat, and taken up the cane; unconsciously, perhaps; but the movement had not escaped the guilty man's furtive glance. He kept silence; and with his face darkened by a gloomy scowl, still sat biting his nails. The will would be found. The genuine document would be compared with the fabrication he had placed amongst his great-uncle's papers, and perpetual shame, punishment, and misery would be his lot. What he suffered to-night, sitting amongst these people, not one of whom he could count as a friend, was only a fore-

taste of what he would have to suffer by-and-by in a criminal dock.

For some time there was silence in the room. The two sisters, anxious and perplexed, looked almost despairingly at each other, fearful that at the end of all this business they would be the sufferers; cheated, in their helplessness, either by George Vane's daughter or by Launcelot Darrell. Eleanor, exhausted by her own excitement, sat with her eyes fixed upon the door, waiting for the coming of the old butler.

More than a quarter of an hour passed in this way. Then the door opened, and Mr. Parker made his appearance.

"You have found it!" cried Eleanor, starting to her feet.

"No, ma'am. No, Miss Lavinia," added the butler. "I have searched every inch of the garding, and there is nothink in the shape of a paper to be found. The housemaid was with me, and she searched likewise."

"It *must* be in the garden," exclaimed Eleanor, "it must be there—unless it has been blown away."

"There's not wind enough for that, ma'am. The s'rubberies are 'igh, and it would take a

deal of wind to blow a paper across the tops of the trees."

"And you've searched the ground under the trees?" asked Mr. Monckton.

"Yes, sir. We've searched everywhere; me and the 'ousemaid."

Launcelot Darrell burst into a loud laugh, an insolent, strident laugh.

"Why, I thought as much," he cried; "the whole story is a farce. I beg your pardon, Mr. Monckton, for calling it a conspiracy. It is merely a slight hallucination of your wife's; and I dare say she is as much George Vane's daughter as I am the fabricator of a forged will."

Mr. Darrell's triumph had made him foolhardy. In the next moment Gilbert Monckton's hand was on the collar of his coat, and the cane uplifted above his shoulders.

"Oh my goodness me!" shrieked Sarah de Crespigny, with a dismal wail, "there'll be murder done presently. Oh, this is too dreadful; in the dead of the night, too."

But before any harm could happen to Launcelot Darrell, Eleanor clung about her husband's upraised arm.

"What you said just now was the truth,

Gilbert," she cried, "he is not worthy of it; he is not, indeed. He is beneath an honest man's anger. Let him alone; for my sake let him alone. Retribution must come upon him sooner or later. I thought it had come to-night, but there has been witchcraft in all this business. I *can't* understand it."

"Stay, Eleanor," said Gilbert Monckton, putting down his cane, and turning away from Launcelot Darrell as he might have turned from a mongrel cur that he had been dissuaded from punishing: "This last will—what was the wording of it—to whom did it leave the fortune?"

Launcelot Darrell looked up eagerly, breathlessly waiting for Eleanor's answer.

"I don't know," she said.

"What, have you forgotten?"

"No, I never knew anything about the contents of the will. I had no opportunity of looking at it. I took it from the chair on which Launcelot Darrell threw it, and put it in my pocket. From that moment to this I have never seen it."

"How do you know, then, that it was a will?" asked Gilbert Monckton.

"Because I heard Launcelot Darrell and

his companion speak of it as the genuine will."

The young man seemed infinitely relieved by the knowledge of Eleanor's ignorance.

"Come, Mr. Monckton," he said, with an air of injured innocence, "you have been very anxious to investigate the grounds of your wife's accusation, and have been very ready to believe in a most absurd story. You have even gone so far as to wish to execute summary vengeance upon me with a walking-stick. I think it's my turn now to ask a few questions."

"You can ask as many as your please," answered the lawyer.

His mind was bewildered by what had happened. Eleanor's earnestness, which had seemed so real, had all ended in nothing. How if it was all acting; how if some darker mystery lurked beneath all this tumult of accusation and denial? The canker of suspicion, engendered by one woman's treachery, had taken deep root in Gilbert Monckton's breast. He had lost one of the purest and highest gifts of a noble nature: the power to trust.

"Very well, then," said Launcelot Darrell, turning to Eleanor: "perhaps you will tell me

how I contrived to open this cabinet, out of which you say I stole one document, and into which you declare I introduced another?"

"You took the keys from Mr. de Crespigny's room."

"Indeed! But is there no one keeping watch in that room?"

"Yes," cried Miss Sarah, "Jepcott is there. Jepcott has been there ever since my beloved uncle expired. Nothing has been disturbed, and Jepcott has had the care of the room. We could trust Jepcott with untold gold."

"Yes," said Miss Lavinia, "with untold gold."

"But she was asleep!" cried Eleanor, "the woman was asleep when that man went into the room."

"Asleep!" exclaimed Miss Sarah; "oh, surely not. Surely Jepcott would not deceive us; I can't think that of her. The very last words I said to her were, 'Jepcott, do you feel at all sleepy? If you feel in the least degree sleepy, have the housemaid to sit with you—make assurance doubly sure, and have the housemaid!' 'No, Miss,' Jepcott said, 'I never felt more wakeful in my life, and as to the girl, she's a poor, frightened silly, and I don't think you could induce her to go

into master's room, though you were to offer her a five-pound note for doing it.' And if Jepcott went to sleep after this, knowing that everything was left about just as it was when my uncle died, it was really too bad of her."

"Send for Mrs. Jepcott," said Launcelot Darrell; "let us hear what she has to say about this very probable story of my stealing my great-uncle's keys."

Miss Lavinia de Crespigny rang the bell, which was answered by Mr. Parker, who, though usually slow to respond to any summons, was wonderfully prompt in his attendance this evening.

"Tell Mrs. Jepcott to come here," said Miss Lavinia, "I want to speak to her."

The butler departed upon this errand, and again there was a silent pause, which seemed a very long one, but which only extended over five minutes. At the end of that time Mrs. Jepcott appeared. She was a respectable looking woman, prim, and rather grim in appearance. She had been in the dead man's service for five-and-thirty years, and was about fifteen years older than the Misses de Crespigny, whom she always spoke of as "the young ladies."

"Jepcott," said Miss Sarah, "I want to know

whether anybody whatever, except yourself, has entered Mr. de Crespigny's room since you have been placed in charge of it?"

"Oh, dear no, miss," answered the housekeeper, promptly, "certainly not."

"Are you sure of that, Jepcott?"

"Quite sure, miss, as sure as I am that I am standing here this moment."

"You speak very confidently, Jepcott, but this is really a most serious business. I am told that you have been asleep."

"Asleep, Miss de Crespigny! Oh, dear, who *could* say anything of the kind? Who could be so wicked as to tell such a story?"

"You are certain that you have not been asleep?"

"Yes, miss, quite certain. I closed my eyes sometimes, for my sight is weak, as you know, miss, and the light dazzled me, and made my eyes ache. I close my eyes generally when I sit down of an evening, for my sight doesn't allow me to do needlework by candlelight, neither to read a newspaper; and I may have closed my eyes to-night, but I didn't go to *sleep,* miss, oh dear no; I was too nervous and anxious for that, a great deal; besides, I am not a good sleeper at

any time, and so I should have heard if a mouse had stirred in the room."

"You didn't hear me come into the room, did you Mrs. Jepcott?" asked Launcelot Darrell.

"*You*, Mr. Darrell? Oh, dear, no; neither you nor anybody else, sir."

"And you don't think that I could have come into the room without your knowing it? You don't think I could have come in while you were asleep?"

"But I *wasn't* asleep, Mr. Darrell; and as for you or anybody comin' in without my hearin' 'em —why I heard every leaf that stirred outside the windows."

"I fear that at least this part of your charge must drop to the ground, Mrs. Monckton," Launcelot Darrell said, scornfully.

"Jepcott," said Miss Lavinia de Crespigny, "go back and see if my uncle's keys are safe."

"Yes, do, Mrs. Jepcott," exclaimed Launcelot Darrell; "and be sure you take notice whether they have been disturbed since your master died."

The housekeeper left the room, and returned after about three minutes' absence.

"The keys are quite safe, Miss Lavinia," she said.

"And they have not been disturbed?" asked Launcelot.

"No, Mr. Darrell, they haven't been moved a quarter of an inch. They're lyin' just where they lay when my poor master died, half hid under a pocket-handkerchief."

Launcelot Darrell drew a long breath. How wonderfully these foolish women had played into his hands, and helped him to escape.

"That will do, Jepcott," said Miss Sarah, "you may go now. Remember that you are responsible for everything in my uncle's room until the arrival of Mr. Lawford's clerk. It would have been a very bad business for you if Mr. de Crespigny's keys had been tampered with."

Mrs. Jepcott looked rather alarmed at this remark, and retired without delay. Suppose she had been asleep, after all, for five minutes or so, and some mischief had arisen out of it, what might not her punishment be. She had a very vague idea of the power of the law, and did not know what penalties she might have incurred by five minutes' unconscious dose. This honest woman had been in the habit of spending the evening in a series of intermittent naps for the last ten years, and had no idea that while closing

her eyes to shade them from the glare of the light, she often slumbered soundly for an hour at a stretch.

"Well, Mrs. Monckton," Launcelot Darrell said, when the housekeeper had left the room, "I suppose now you are convinced that all this mid-winter night's dream is a mere hallucination of your own?"

Eleanor looked at him with a contemptuous smile, whose open scorn was not the least painful torture he had been obliged to bear that night.

"Do not speak to me," she said; "remember who I am; and let that memory keep you silent."

The door-bell rang loudly as Eleanor finished speaking.

"Thank heaven!" exclaimed Miss de Crespigny, "Mr. Lawford's clerk has come at last. He will take charge of everything, and *if* anybody has tampered with my uncle's papers," she added, looking first at Launcelot and then at Eleanor, "I have no doubt that he will find out all about it. We are poor unprotected women, but I dare say we shall find those who will be able to defend our rights."

"I don't think we have any occasion to stop

here," said Mr. Monckton; "are you ready to come home, Eleanor?"

"Quite ready," his wife answered.

"You have nothing more to say?"

"Nothing."

"Put on your cloak, then, and come. Good-night, Miss de Crespigny. Good-night, Miss Lavinia."

Mr. Lawford's clerk came in while Gilbert Monckton and his wife were leaving the room. He was the same old man whom Richard Thornton had seen at Windsor. Eleanor perceived that this man was surprised to see Launcelot Darrell. He started, and looked at the artist with a half-frightened, half-inquiring glance; but the young man did not return the look.

CHAPTER VII.

LAURA'S TROUBLES.

GILBERT MONCKTON offered Eleanor his arm as they went out of the hall and down the steps before the front entrance.

"I would have got a conveyance for you if it had been possible, Eleanor," he said; "but of course at this time of night that is utterly out of the question. Do you think that you can manage the walk home?"

"Oh, yes; very well indeed."

She sighed as she spoke. She felt completely baffled by what had occurred; terribly prostrated by the defeat which had befallen her. There was no hope, then. This base and treacherous man was always to triumph: however wicked, however criminal.

"Is it very late?" she asked, presently.

"Yes, very late—past one o'clock."

The husband and wife walked homewards in

silence. The road seemed even drearier than before to Eleanor, though this time she had a companion in her dismal journey. But this time despair was gnawing at her breast; she had been supported before by excitement, buoyed up by hope.

They reached Tolldale at last. The butler admitted them. He had sent all the other servants to bed, and had sat up alone to receive his master. Even upon this night of bewilderment Gilbert Monckton endeavoured to keep up appearances.

"We have been to Woodlands," he said to the old servant. "Mr. de Crespigny is dead."

He had no doubt that his own and his wife's absence had given rise to wonderment in the quiet household; and he thought by this means to set all curiosity at rest. But the drawing-room door opened while he was speaking, and Laura rushed into the hall.

"Oh, my goodness gracious," she exclaimed, "here you are at last. What I have suffered this evening! Oh! what agonies I have suffered this evening, wondering what had happened, and thinking of all sorts of horrid things."

"But, my dear Laura, why didn't you go to bed?" asked Mr. Monckton.

"*Go to bed!*" screamed the young lady. "Go to bed with my poor brain bursting with suspense. I'm sure if people's brains *do* burst, it's a wonder mine hasn't to-night, and I thought ever so many times it was going to do it. First Eleanor goes out without leaving word where *she's* gone; and then you go out without leaving word where *you're* gone; and then you both stay away for hours, and hours, and hours. And there I sit all the time watching the clock, with nobody but the Skye to keep me company; until I get so nervous that I daren't look behind me, and I almost begin to feel as if the Skye was a demon dog! And, oh, do tell me what in goodness' name has happened."

"Come into the drawing-room, Laura; and pray don't talk so fast. I'll tell you presently."

Mr. Monckton walked into the drawing-room followed by Laura and his wife. He closed the door, and then sat down by the fire.

"I've had coals put on five times," exclaimed Miss Mason, "but all the coals in the world wouldn't keep me from shivering and feeling as if somebody was coming in through the door and looking over my shoulder. If it hadn't been for

the Skye I should have gone mad. What *has* happened?"

"Something has happened at Woodlands—" Mr. Monckton began gravely; but Laura interrupted him with a little shriek.

"Oh, don't," she cried, "don't, please; I'd rather you didn't. I know what you're going to say. You must come and sleep with me to-night, Eleanor, if you don't want to find me raving mad in the morning. No wonder I felt as if the room was peopled with ghosts."

"Don't be foolish, Laura," Mr. Monckton said, impatiently. "You asked me what has happened, and I tell you. To speak plain, Mr. de Crespigny is dead."

"Yes, I guessed that, of course; directly you began to speak in that solemn way. It's very dreadful—not that he should be dead, you know; because I scarcely ever saw him, and when I did see him, he always seemed to be deaf, or grumpy—but it seems dreadful that people should die at all; and I always fancy they'll come walking into the room at night when I'm taking my hair down before the glass, and look over my shoulder, as they do in German stories."

"Laura!"

"Oh, please don't look contemptuously at me," cried Miss Mason, piteously; "of course, if you haven't got nerves it's very easy to despise these things; and I wish *I'd* been born a man or a lawyer, or something of that sort, so that I might never be nervous. Not that I believe in ghosts, you know; I'm not so childish as that. I don't believe in them, and I'm not afraid of them; *but I dont like them!*"

Gilbert Monckton's contemptuous expression changed to a look of pity. This was the foolish girl whom he had been about to entrust to the man he now knew to be a villain. He *now* knew: —bah, he had paltered with his own conscience. He had known it from the first. And this poor child loved Launcelot Darrell. Her hopes, like his own, were shipwrecked: even in the egotism of his misery the strong man felt some compassion for this helpless girl.

"So, Mr. de Crespigny is dead," Laura said after a pause; "does Launcelot know it yet?"

"He does."

"Was he there to night—up at Woodlands, in spite of his nasty old aunts?"

"Yes, he was there."

Eleanor looked anxiously, almost piteously at Laura. The great disappointment, the death-blow of every hope, was coming down upon her; and Eleanor, who could see the hand uplifted to strike, and the cruel knife bared ready to inflict the fatal stab, shivered as she thought of the misery the thoughtless girl must have to suffer.

"But what can her misery be against my father's," she thought, "and how am *I* accountable for her sorrow. It is all Launcelot Darrell's work; it is his wicked work from first to last."

"And do you think he will have the fortune?" Laura asked.

"I don't know, my dear," her guardian answered gravely, "but I think it matters very little either to you or me whether he may get the fortune or not."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, "how strangely you speak; how cruelly and coldly you speak of Launcelot, just as if you didn't care whether he was rich or poor. Oh, good heavens," she shrieked, suddenly growing wild with terror, "why do you both look at me like that? Why do you both look so anxious? I know that something dreadful has happened. Something has

happened to Launcelot! It's not Mr. de Crespigny, it's Launcelot that's dead!"

"No, no, Laura, he is not dead. It would be better perhaps if he were. He is not a good man, Laura, and he can never be your husband."

"Oh, I don't care a bit about his not being good, as long as he isn't dead," exclaimed Laura. "I never said he was good, and never wanted him to be good. *I'm* not good; for I don't like going to church three times every Sunday. The idea of your saying my poor dear Launcelot musn't marry me because he isn't good! I like him to be a little wicked; like the Giaour, or Manfred—though goodness gracious only knows what *he'd* done that he should go on as he did—I never asked him to be good. Goodness wouldn't go well with his style of looks. It's fair people, with wishy-washy blue eyes and straight hair, and no eyebrows or eyelashes in particular, that are generally good. I hate *good* people, and if you don't let me marry Launcelot Darrell now, I shall marry him when I'm of age, and that'll be in three years' time."

Miss Mason said all this with great vehemence and indignation, and then walked towards the door of the room; but Eleanor stopped her,

and caught the slender little figure in her arms.

"Ah! Laura, Laura," she cried, "you must listen to us, you must hear us, my poor darling. I know it seems very cruel to speak against the man you love, but it would be fifty times more cruel to let you marry him, and leave you to discover afterwards, when your life was linked to his, and never, never could be a happy life again if parted from him, that he was unworthy of your love. If it is terrible to be told this now, Laura, it would be a thousand times more terrible to hear it then. Come with me to your room, dear; I will stay with you all to-night. I will tell you all I know about Launcelot Darrell. I ought to have told you before, perhaps; but I waited; I waited for what I begin to think will never come."

"I won't believe anything against him," cried Laura, passionately, disengaging herself from Eleanor's embrace; "I won't listen to you. I won't hear a word. *I* know why you don't want me to marry him. You were in love with him yourself, you know you were, and you're jealous of me, and you want to prevent my being happy with him."

Of all the unlucky speeches that could have been made in the presence of Gilbert Monckton, this was perhaps the most unlucky. He started as if he had been stung, and rising from his seat near the fire, took a lighted candle from a side table, and walked to the door.

"I really can't endure all this," he said. "Eleanor, I'll leave you with Laura. Say what you have to say about Launcelot Darrell, and for pity's sake let me never hear his name again. Good night."

The two girls were left alone together. Laura had thrown herself upon a sofa, and was sobbing violently. Eleanor stood a few paces from her, looking at her with the same tender and compassionate expression with which she had regarded her from the first.

"When I see your troubles, Laura," she said, "I almost forget my own. My poor dear child, God knows how truly I pity you."

"But I don't want your pity," cried Laura. "I shall hate you if you say anything against Launcelot. Why should anybody pity me? I am engaged to the man I love, the only man I ever loved,—you know that, Eleanor; you know how I fell in love with him directly he came to

Hazlewood,—and I will marry him in spite of all the world. I shall be of age in three years, and then no horrid guardians can prevent my doing what I like!"

"But you would not marry him, Laura, if you knew him to be a bad man?"

"I would never believe that he is a bad man!"

"But, my darling, you will listen to me. I must tell you the truth. I have kept it from you too long. I have been very guilty in keeping it from you. I ought to have told you when I first came back to Tolldale."

"*What* ought you to have told me?"

"The story of my life, Laura. But I thought you would come between me and the victory I wanted to achieve."

"What victory?"

"A victory over the man who caused my father's death."

Then, little by little, interrupted by a hundred exclamations and protestations from the sobbing girl whose head lay on her shoulder, and whose waist was encircled by her arm, Eleanor Monckton told the story of her return to Paris, the meeting on the Boulevard, and George Vane's suicide. Little by little she contrived to explain to the

wretched girl, who clung about her, and who declared again and again that she *would* not believe anything against Launcelot, that she could not think him cruel or treacherous,—how the artist and his vile associate, Victor Bourdon, had cheated the old man out of the money which represented his own honour and the future welfare of his child.

"You think me hard and merciless, Laura," she cried, "and I sometimes wonder at my own feelings; but remember, only remember what my father suffered. He was cheated out of the money that had been entrusted to him. He was afraid to face his own child. Oh, my poor dear, how could you wrong me so cruelly," she murmured in a low voice, as if addressing that dead father, "how could you think that I should have spoken one word of reproach, or loved you any the less, if you had lost a dozen fortunes of mine? No, Laura, I *cannot* forget what my father suffered; I *cannot* be merciful to this man."

Eleanor's task was a very hard one. Laura would not believe; that is to say, she would not acknowledge that she believed; but she had none of the calm assurance which a perfect and entire faith in her lover should have given her. It was

useless to reason with her. All Eleanor's logic was powerless against the passionate force of this girl's perpetual cry, the gist of which was "I will believe no harm of him! I love him, and I will not cease to love him!"

She would not argue, or listen to Eleanor's calm reasoning; for Mrs. Monckton was very calm in the knowledge of her own defeat, almost despairingly resigned, in the idea that all struggle against Launcelot Darrell was hopeless. Laura would not listen, would not be convinced. The man whom Eleanor had seen in Paris was not Launcelot. He was in India at that very time. He had written letters from India, and posted them thence, with foreign postage stamps. The shipbroker's books were all wrong; what was more likely than that stupid shipbrokers' clerks should make wrong entries in their horrid books? In short, according to poor Laura's reasoning, Launcelot Darrell was the victim of a series of coincidences. There had happened to be a person who resembled him in Paris at the time of George Vane's death. There had happened to be a mistake in the shipbroker's books. The figure in the water-coloured sketch that Eleanor had stolen happened to be like the old man. Miss Mason

rejected circumstantial evidence in toto. As for the story of the forgery, she declared that it was all a fabrication of Eleanor's, invented in order that the marriage should be postponed.

"You're very cruel, Eleanor," she cried, "and you've acted very treacherously, and I shouldn't have thought it of you. First you fall in love with Launcelot Darrell; and then you go and marry my guardian; and then, when you find that you don't like my guardian, you begrudge me my happiness; and you now want to set me against Launcelot; but I will not be set against him. THERE!"

This last decisive monosyllable was uttered amidst a torrent of sobs, and then, for a long time, the two girls sat in silence upon the sofa before the expiring fire. By-and-by, Laura nestled her head a little closer upon Eleanor's shoulder; then a little hand, very cold, by reason of its owner's agitation, stole into the open palm lying idle upon Mrs. Monckton's lap; and at last, in a low voice, almost stifled by tears, she murmured:

"*Do* you think that he is wicked? Oh! Eleanor, do you *really* think that it was he who cheated your poor old father?"

"I know that it was he, Laura."

"And do you believe that he has made a false will, for the sake of that dreadful money? Oh, how could he care for the money, when we might have been so happy together poor! Do you *really* believe that he has committed—forgery?"

She dropped her voice to a whisper as she spoke the word that was so awful to her when uttered in relation to Launcelot Darrell.

"I believe it, and I know it, Laura," Eleanor answered, gravely.

"But what will they do to him? What will become of him? They won't hang him—will they, Eleanor? They don't hang people for forgery now. Oh, Eleanor, what will become of him? I love him so dearly, I don't care what he is, or what he has done. I love him still, and would die to save him."

"You need not be afraid, Laura," Mrs. Monckton answered bitterly. "Launcelot Darrell will escape all evil consequences of what he has done. You may be sure of that. He will hold his head higher than he ever held it yet, Laura. He will be master of Woodlands before next week is over."

"But his conscience, Eleanor, his conscience! He will be so unhappy—he will be so miserable."

Laura disengaged herself from the loving arm that had supported her, and started to her feet.

"Eleanor!" she cried, "where is he? Let me go to him! It is not too late to undo all this, perhaps. He can put back the real will, can't he?"

"No, the real will is lost."

"He can destroy the false one, then."

"I don't think he will have the chance of doing that, Laura. If his heart is not hardened against remorse, he will have plenty of time for repentance between this and the time when the will is read. If he wishes to undo what he has done, he may make a confession to his aunts, and throw himself upon their mercy. They are the only persons likely to be injured by what he has done. The money was left to them in the original will, no doubt."

"He *shall* confess, Eleanor!" cried Laura. "I will throw myself upon my knees at his feet, and I won't leave him till he promises me to undo what he has done. His aunts will keep the secret, for their own sakes. They wouldn't like the world to know that their nephew could do such a wicked thing. He shall confess to them, and let them have the fortune, and then we can be

married, and then we shall be as happy together as if he had never done wrong. Let me go to him."

"Not to night, Laura. Look at the clock."

Eleanor pointed to the dial of the timepiece opposite them. It was half-past two o'clock.

"I will see him to-morrow morning then, Eleanor. I *will* see him."

"You shall, my dear; if you think it wise or right to do so."

But Laura Mason did not see her lover the next morning; for when the morning came, she was in a burning fever, brought on by the agitation and excitement of the previous night. A medical man was summoned from Windsor to attend upon her; and Eleanor sat by her bed-side, watching her as tenderly as a mother watches her sick child.

Gilbert Monckton too was very anxious about his ward, and came to the door of Laura's room to make inquiries many times in the course of that day.

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING OVER IT.

LAURA MASON was not dangerously ill. Her malady was by no means of a serious nature. The pink-blossom tint of her cheeks was intensified into vivid carnation; the turquoise-blue eyes shone with a feverish light; the little hands were very hot and dry. It was in vain that the physician from Windsor prescribed composing draughts. His patient would not be quiet or composed. In vain Eleanor tried to soothe the wounded spirit. It would not be at rest.

"It's no use, Nelly," the invalid cried, impatiently, "I *must* talk of him; I must talk of my sorrows, unless you want me to go mad. Oh, my poor Launcelot! my own dear Launcelot! how cruel it is to keep me from you!"

This was the worst part of the business. Poor Laura was perpetually entreating to be allowed to see Launcelot. Would they let her go to him;

or would they send and ask him to come to her? They were the most cruel and heartless creatures, if they could refuse to let her see him.

But Eleanor did refuse.

"It is impossible, my darling," she said; "I cannot send for him. It is quite impossible that he and I should ever meet again, except as enemies. The will must be read in a few days. Let us wait till then. If Launcelot Darrell is sorry for what he has done, he will try to undo it. If he is not sorry, and takes possession of the estate upon the strength of a forged will, he must be a villain, unworthy even of your pity, Laura."

"But I *do* pity him; and I love him."

It was strange to see what a hold this unhappy affection had taken upon Laura's shallow nature. This frivolous girl was as impressionable as she was volatile. The blow was more terrible to her than it would have been to a woman of higher and grander nature; but to such a woman the consequences of the blow would be, perhaps, life-long, while it was scarcely likely that Laura would suffer for ever. She did not try to endure the grief that had fallen upon her. She was entirely without pride; and had no more shame in bemoaning her loss of Launcelot Darrell, than

she would have had fifteen years before in crying over a broken doll. She did not care who knew her sorrows, and would have made a confidante of the servant who waited upon her, if Eleanor had not interfered to prevent her.

"I'm very miserable and wretched, Jane," she said, while the girl was smoothing her pillows, and arranging the tumbled bed-clothes, which had been twisted into mere wisps of linen by the perpetual tossings to and fro of the invalid. "I'm the most miserable creature that ever was born, Jane, and I wish that I was dead. I know it's wicked, but I do. What's the good of Dr. Featherstone prescribing for me, when I don't want to be prescribed for? What's the good of my taking lime-draughts, when I'd much rather die? What's the use of those horrid opiates, that taste like stale London porter? Opiates won't give me back Launce—"

She stopped abruptly at this point, checked by a warning look from Eleanor.

"You must not speak of Launcelot Darrell to these people, Laura," Mrs. Monckton said, when the servant had left the room, "unless you want them to suspect that something strange has happened."

"But they'll know it, if my wedding is put off."

"Your guardian will explain all that, Laura."

Miss Mason bemoaned her fate even more piteously than before.

"It's hard enough to be miserable," she cried, "but it's still worse to be miserable, and not to be allowed to say so."

"Many people have sorrows to endure that cannot be spoken of," Eleanor answered, quietly. "I had to bear the sorrow of my father's death when I dared not speak of it."

Mrs. Monckton saw very little of her husband during the few days of Laura's illness. She only saw him, indeed, when he came to the door to make inquiries about his ward; but even in the few brief sentences exchanged by them, she could perceive that his manner was altered towards her. He had been cold and distant for a long time since their marriage; but now his manner had the icy reserve of a man who feels that he has been wronged. Eleanor comprehended this, and was sorry for it; but she had a dull, hopeless feeling that nothing she could do would alter it. The great purpose of her life had failed; and she began to think that nothing but failure could come to any hope of hers.

This feeling separated her completely from her husband. In her ignorance of the suspicions which tortured him, she could of course make no effort to set him right. The girl's innocence and the man's pride made a gulf that no power of affection could pass. If Eleanor could have guessed, ever so vaguely, at the cause of her husband's reserve, a few words from her might have melted the ice: but she had not the faintest notion of the hidden source from which came those bitter waters that had swept away all outward tokens of her husband's love; and those words remained unspoken. Gilbert Monckton thought that if his wife was not false, she was at least indifferent; and he bowed his head before the gloomy face of his Destiny.

"I am not to be loved," he said. "Good-by, once more to that dream. And let me try to do my duty, and be in some way useful to my fellow-creatures. Half my life has been swallowed up by egotistical regrets. May God give me grace to use the remnant of it more wisely."

He had told Eleanor that as soon as Laura was a little better he should take her to the seaside.

"The poor child cannot remain here," he said, "every gossip in the neighbourhood will be eager

to know why the wedding is postponed; and unless we assign some simple reason for the change in our arrangements, there will be no limit to people's speculations and conjectures. Laura's illness will be the best possible excuse; and I will take her to the south of France. She may forget Launcelot Darrell by-and-by, when she finds herself in a strange place, surrounded by new associations."

Eleanor eagerly assented to this.

"Nothing could be wiser than such an arrangement," she answered. "I almost think the poor girl would die if she remained here. Everything reminds her of her disappointment."

"Very well, then, I shall take her to Nice as soon as she is well enough to go. Will you tell her that I mean to do so, and try and make her feel some interest in the idea of the change?"

Eleanor Monckton had a very hard time of it in the sick room. Those frivolous people who feel their misfortunes very acutely for the time being, are apt to throw a heavy share of their burden upon the shoulders of their friends. Laura's lamentations were very painful and not a little monotonous to hear; and there was a great deal of hard work to be done in the way of going over

the same ground again and again, for that young lady's consolation. She had no idea of turning her face to the wall and suffering in silence. Her manner had none of that artificial calm which often causes uneasiness to those who watch a beloved sufferer through some terrible crisis. Everything reminded her of her grief; and she would not be courageous enough to put away the things that recalled her sorrows. She could not draw a curtain over the bright picture of the past, and turn her face resolutely to the blank future. She was for ever looking back, and bewailing the beauty of that vanished hope, and insisting that the dream palace was not utterly ruined; that it might be patched up again somehow or other; not to be what it was before, that was impossible, of course; but to be *something*. The broken vase could surely be pieced together, and the scent of the faded roses would hang round it still.

"If he repents, I will marry him, Eleanor," she said, at the end of almost every argument, "and we will go to Italy and be happy together, and he will be a great painter. Nobody would dare to say he had committed a forgery if he was a great painter like Holman Hunt, or Mr. Millais. We'll go to Rome together, Nelly, and he shall

study the old masters, and sketch peasants from the life; and I won't mind even if they're pretty; though it isn't pleasant to have one's husband always sketching pretty peasants; and that will divert his mind, you know."

For four days Laura was ordered to keep to her bed, and during that time Eleanor rarely quitted the invalid's apartments, only taking brief snatches of rest in an easy chair by the fire in Laura's dressing-room. On the fifth day Miss Mason was allowed to get up, and then there were terrible scenes to be gone through; for the young lady insisted upon having her trousseau spread out upon the bed, and the chairs, and the sofas, and hung upon every available peg in the two rooms; until both those apartments became a very forest of finery, about which the invalid prowled perpetually, indulging in a separate fit of weeping over each garment.

"Look at this darling parasol, Nelly," she cried, gazing at the tiny canopy of silk and whalebone with streaming eyes; "isn't the real point lace over the pale pink silk lovely? And then it's so becoming to the complexion, too! Oh, how happy I thought I should be when I had this parasol. I thought I should drive on the

Corso with Launcelot, and *now*——! And the violet-satin boots with high heels, Nelly, made on purpose to wear with my violet-silk dress, I thought nobody *could* be unhappy with such things as those, and *now*——!"

Every speech ended in fresh tears, which sometimes trickled over a shining silken garment, and flecked the lustrous fabric with spots of water that took the brightness out of the splendid hues.

"To think that I should be so miserable as to cry over silk at nine and sixpence a yard, and not to care!" exclaimed Laura Mason; as if, in these words, she described the highest anguish-point that human misery can reach.

She had a few presents given her by Launcelot, they were *very* few, and by no means valuable, for Mr. Darrell, as we know, was essentially selfish, and did not care to spend his small stock of money upon other people; and she sat with these trifles in her lap for hours together, lamenting over them, and talking about them.

"There's my silver thimble, my dear, darling little silver thimble," she said, perching the scrap of glistening metal upon her little finger, and kissing it with that degree of rapture which the French vaudeville-ists call "explosion!"—"that

nasty, spiteful Amelia Shalders said a silver thimble was a vulgar present, just what a carpenter, or any other common man, would have given to his sweetheart, and that Launcelot ought to have given me a ring or a bracelet, as if he could go buying rings and bracelets without any money. And I don't care whether my thimble's vulgar or not, and I love it dearly, because he gave it me. And I'd do lots of needlework for the sake of using it, only I never could learn to use a thimble—quite. It always seems so much easier to work without one, though it does make a hole in the top of one's finger. Then there's my tablets! Nobody can say that ivory tablets are vulgar. My darling little tablets, with the tiny, *tiny* gold pencil-case,"—the gold pencil-case was *very* tiny,—" and the wee mite of a turquoise for a seal. I've tried to write 'Launcelot' upon every leaf, but I don't think ivory tablets are the very nicest things to write upon. One's writing seems to slide about somehow as if the pencil was tipsy; and the lines won't come straight. It's like trying to walk up and down the deck of a steamer; one goes where one doesn't want to go."

The bewailings over the trousseau and the presents had a beneficial effect upon the heart-

broken invalid. On the evening of the fifth day her spirits began to revive a little; she drank tea with Eleanor at a table by the fire in the dressing-room, and after tea tried on her wedding bonnet and mantle before the cheval glass.

This performance seemed to have a peculiarly consoling effect; and after surveying herself for a long time in the glass, and lamenting the redness of her eyelids, which prevented full justice being done to the beauty of the bonnet, Miss Mason declared that she felt a great deal better, and that she had a presentiment that something would happen, and that everything would come right somehow or other.

As it would have been very cruel to deprive her of this rather vague species of comfort, Eleanor said nothing, and the evening ended almost cheerfully. But the next day was that appointed for Mr. de Crespigny's funeral and the reading of the will; and Laura's anxiety was now really greater than it had ever been. She could not help believing Eleanor's story of the forgery, though she had struggled long against the conviction that had been forced upon her; and her only hope was that her lover would repent, and suffer his aunts to inherit the wealth which had been no

doubt bequeathed to them. Frivolous and shallow as this girl was, she could not for a moment contemplate marrying Launcelot under any other circumstances. She could not think of sharing with him a fortune that had been gained by fraud.

"I know he will confess the truth," she said to Eleanor, upon the morning of the funeral; "he was led into doing wrong by his friend, that wicked Frenchman. It was only the impulse of the moment. He has been sorry ever since, I dare say. He will undo what he has done."

"But if the real will has been destroyed?"

"Then his two aunts and his mother would share the estate between them. My guardian told me so the other day when I asked him some question about the fortune. And he told Launcelot the same thing that night in the library, when they had the conversation about my fortune."

If Laura was anxious upon this eventful day, Eleanor was anxious too. It was a new crisis in her life. Would Launcelot Darrell attempt to restore himself to the position he had occupied before the night of his uncle's death, or would he hold to that which he might acquire by his deliberate fraud, and remain a hardened and impenitent criminal, defiant of the law he had outraged?

CHAPTER IX.

THE READING OF THE WILL.

Gilbert Monckton went up to Woodlands immediately after the funeral, in order to be present at the reading of the will. He felt that he had a right to see the end of this business, in which his wife had played so extraordinary a part. The will was to be read by Henry Lawford's clerk, in the sitting-room, or study, which Maurice de Crespigny had occupied for many years before his death.

There were a great many people who, like Gilbert Monckton, thought they had a right to be present upon this occasion; people who had been kept out of the old man's house by the rigid watchfulness and the inflexible will of the two maiden ladies for the last twenty years or so, but who were freely admitted now, as no longer capable of doing mischief. All manner of distant relationships, so remote as to be almost untraceble, came to light upon this occasion: cousins,

by marriage; sisters-in-law of dead first cousins, once removed; widowers, who attached themselves to the house of Crespigny by right of departed wives; widows who declared themselves near relations on the strength of claims held by defunct husbands; poor connections who came on foot, and who were so poor that it was really an impertinence in them to expect the smallest legacy; rich connections who came in splendid carriages, and who seemed even more eager for any stray twenty pounds for a mourning ring, that might be set against their names, than the poorest of the brotherhood. And indeed these owners of splendid carriages might have been needier than the dusty and weatherbeaten pedestrians; for when people try to make fifteen hundred a-year do the work of three thousand, every accidental twenty pounds is a God-send to them.

However it might be, everybody in the Woodlands drawing-room upon that particular morning was influenced by the same feeling, a compound sensation of hope and distrust, expectancy and despair. Surely there could never before have been so many eager faces assembled together in the same small space. Every face, young or old,

handsome or ugly, aristocratic or plebeian, wore the same expression; and had thus a common likeness, which bore out the idea of some tie of relationship binding the whole assembly.

Every one regarded his or her neighbour as the possible inheritor of something worth having, and therefore a personal enemy. Smiling relations were suspected of being acquainted with the contents of the will, and secretly rejoicing in the certainty of their own names being pleasantly mentioned therein. Frowning relations were looked at darkly as probable arch-plotters who had worked upon the mind of the dead man. Diffident relations were feared as toadies and sycophants, who had no doubt plied Mr. de Crespigny with artful flatteries. Confident relations were dreaded as people who perhaps had some secret claim upon the estate, and were silently gloating over the excellence of their chances. Every one of these outsiders hated each other with vengeful and murderous hate; but they all sympathised in a far deeper hatred of the four favourites for these great legacy stakes, the two maiden ladies, Mrs. Darrell, and her son. It was almost certain that one or other of these four people would inherit the Woodlands property,

and the bulk of the dead man's fortune; unless, indeed, by one of those caprices common to eccentric valetudinarians, he should have left his wealth to some distant connexion, who had been too proud to toady him—and had moreover never had the chance of doing so. Yes, the three nieces and Launcelot were the first favourites in this eager race; and the outsiders speculated freely amongst themselves as to the chances and the "condition" of these four fortunate creatures. And if the outsiders hated each other desperately for the sake of very small chances, how much more desperate must have been the feelings of these four who were to enter for the great stake.

Launcelot Darrell met Mr. Monckton this morning for the first time since that strange scene upon the night of Maurice de Crespigny's death. The young man had called at Tolldale Priory during the interval, but both the lawyer and his ward had been denied to him.

Perhaps amongst all those assembled in the chamber which had so lately been tenanted by the dead man, there was not one more painfully anxious than Gilbert Monckton, into whose mind no mercenary thought had ever entered.

It was in the hope of seeing his wife justified

that Mr. Monckton had come to Woodlands upon this day. He had brooded over Eleanor's denunciation of Launcelot Darrell perpetually during the week that had elapsed since the old man's death; but the more he pondered upon that passionate accusation the more bewildered and perplexed he became.

Let it be remembered that he was a man whose nature had been rendered jealous and suspicious by one cruel deception which had embittered his youth and soured a generous disposition. His mind was penetrated with the idea that Eleanor had never loved him, and that she *had* loved Launcelot Darrell. This belief was the tormenting spirit, the insidious demon which had held possession of his breast ever since his brief honeymoon on the northern coast. He could not dismiss it all in a moment. The fiend was in possession, and was not very easily to be exorcised. That vehement denunciation, that passionate accusation which had rushed, impetuous and angry, from Eleanor Monckton's lips, might be the outburst of a jealous woman's fury, and might have its root in love. Eleanor had loved this young man, and was indignant against him for his intended marriage with Laura. If the desire to

avenge her father's death had alone actuated her, surely this passionate girl would have spoken before now. It was thus that Gilbert Monckton argued. He did not know how eager Eleanor had been to speak, and how she had only been held back by the worldly wisdom of Richard Thornton. How should he know the long trial of patience, the bitter struggle between the promptings of passion and the cold arguments of policy which his wife had endured. He knew nothing except that something—some secret—some master passion—had absorbed her soul, and separated her from him.

He stood aloof in the dead man's study while Mr. Lamb, the clerk, a grey-haired old man, with a nervous manner and downcast eyes, arranged his papers upon a little table near the fire and cleared his throat preparatory to commencing the reading of the will.

There was an awful silence in the room, as if everybody's natural respiration had been suspended all in a moment, and then the clerk's low voice began very slowly and hesitatingly with the usual formula.

"I, Maurice de Crespigny, being at this time," &c., &c. The will was of some length, and as it

began with a great many insignificant legacies, mourning rings, snuff-boxes, books, antique plate, scraps of valuable china, and small donations, of all kinds to distant relations and friends who had been lost sight of on the lonely pathway along which the old man had crawled to his tomb under the grim guardianship of his two warders—the patience of the chief expectants was very sorely tried. But at last, after modest little annuities to the servants had been mentioned, the important clauses were arrived at.

To every one of the three sisters, Sarah and Lavinia de Crespigny and Ellen Darrell, the testator bequeathed money in the funds to the amount of two hundred a-year. All the "rest and residue" of his estate, real and personal, was left to Launcelot Darrell, absolutely, without condition or reserve.

The blood rushed up to the widow's face, and then as suddenly receded, leaving it ghastly white. She held out her hand to her son who stood beside her chair, and clasped his clammy fingers in her own.

"Thank God," she said in a low voice, "you have got your chance at last, Launcelot. I should be content to die to-morrow."

The two sisters, pale and venomous, glared at their nephew. But they could only look at him. They could do nothing against him. He had won and they had lost; that was all. They felt strange buzzing noises in their ears, and the carpeted floor of the room seemed reeling up and down like the deck of a storm-tost vessel. This was all that they felt just at present. The shock was so great that its first effect was only to produce a kind of physical numbness which extended even to the brain.

I don't suppose that either of these elderly ladies, each of whom wore stuff shoes and crisp little curls of unnaturally brown hair upon her forehead, could, by any possibility, have spent upon her own wants more than a hundred pounds a-year, nor had either of them been accustomed to indulge in the sweet luxury of charity; they were neither generous nor ambitious. They were entirely without the capacity of spending money either upon themselves or on other people, and yet they had striven as eagerly for the possession of this fortune as ever any proud, ambitious spirit strove for the golden means by which he hoped to work his way upon the road that leads to glory.

They were fond of money; they were fond of money, *per se;* without reference to its uses, either noble or ignoble. They would have been very happy in the possession of their dead kinsman's fortune, though they might have gone down to their graves without having spent so much as the two hundred a-year which they received by this cruel will. They would have hoarded the government securities in an iron safe; they would have added interest to principal; they would have nursed the lands, and raised the rents, and been hard and griping with the tenants, and would have counted their gains and calculated together the increase of their wealth; but they would have employed the same cobbler who had worked for them before their uncle's death; they would still have given out their stuff shoes to be mended; and they would have been as sharp as ever as to an odd sixpence in their dealings with the barber who dressed their crisp brown curls.

Launcelot Darrell kept his place beside his mother's chair though the reading of the will was finished, and the clerk was folding the sheets upon which it was written. Never had any living creature shown less elation than this young

man did upon his accession to such a very large fortune.

Mr. Monckton went up to the little table at which the lawyer's clerk sat, folding up the papers.

"Will you let me look at that will for a moment, Mr. Lamb?" he asked.

The clerk looked up at him with an expression of surprise.

"You wish to look at it—?" he said, hesitating a little.

"Yes. There is no objection to my doing so, is there? It will be sent to Doctors' Commons, I suppose, where anybody will be able to look at it for a shilling."

The clerk handed Gilbert Monckton the document with a feeble little laugh.

"There it is, Mr. Monckton," he said. "You remember your own signature, I dare say; you'll find it there along with mine."

Yes, there was the signature. It is not a very easy thing for the cleverest man, who is not a professional expert, to decide upon the authenticity of his own autograph. There it was. Gilbert Monckton looked at the familiar signature, and tried in vain to find some flaw in it. If it was a forgery, it was a very skilful one. The lawyer

remembered the date of the will which he had witnessed, and the kind of paper upon which it had been written. The date and the paper of this corresponded with that recollection.

The body of the will was in the handwriting of the clerk himself. It was written upon three sheets of foolscap paper, and the signatures of the testator and the two witnesses were repeated at the bottom of every page. Every one of the three autographs differed from the others in some trifling point, and this circumstance, small in itself, had considerable influence upon Gilbert Monckton.

"If this will had been a forgery, prepared by Launcelot Darrell, the signatures would have been fac-similes of each other," thought the lawyer; "that is a mistake which forgers almost always fall into. They forget that a man very rarely signs his name twice alike. They get hold of one autograph and stereotype it."

What was he to think, then? If this will was genuine, Eleanor's accusation must be a falsehood. Could he believe this? Could he believe that his wife was a jealous and vindictive woman, capable of inventing a lie in order to revenge herself upon the infidelity of the man she had loved? To

believe this would be most everlasting misery. Yet how could Gilbert Monckton think otherwise, *if* the will was genuine? Everything hinged upon that, and every proof was wanting against Launcelot Darrell. The housekeeper, Mrs. Jepcott, declared most distinctly that nobody had entered the dead man's room or touched the keys upon the table by the bed. This alone, if the woman's word was to be depended upon, gave the lie to Eleanor's story.

But this was not all. The will was in every particular the very opposite of such a will as would be likely to be the work of a forger.

It contained legacies to old friends of the dead man whom he had not himself seen for twenty years, and whose very names must have been unknown to Launcelot Darrell. It was the will of a man whose mind lived almost entirely in the past. There was a gold snuff-box bequeathed "to my friend Peter Sedgewick, who was stroke in the Magdalen boat at Henley-on-the-Thames, fifty-seven years ago, when I was six in the same boat;" there was an onyx shirt-pin left "to my old boon companion Henry Laurence, who dined with me at the Beefsteak Club with George Vane and Richard Brinsley Sheridan on my birthday."

The will was full of personal recollections dated fifty years back; and how was it possible that Launcelot Darrell could have fabricated such a will; when by Eleanor's own admission he had no access to the genuine document until he came to substitute the forgery after his uncle's death? The forgery must therefore, Gilbert Monckton argued, have been prepared while the young man was in utter ignorance as to the tenor of the actual will, according to Eleanor's story; and this, the lawyer reasoned, was proof conclusive against his wife.

Launcelot could not have fabricated such a will as this. This will, therefore, was genuine, and Eleanor's accusation had been only prompted by a sudden burst of jealous rage, which had made her almost indifferent to consequences. Mr. Monckton examined the signatures again and again, and then, looking very sharply at the clerk, said, in a low voice:

"The body of this will is in your handwriting, I believe, Mr. Lamb?"

"It is, sir?"

"Can you swear that this is the genuine document; the same will which you wrote and witnessed?"

"Most decidedly," the clerk answered, with a look of astonishment.

"You have no suspicion whatever as to its authenticity?"

"No, sir, none! Have *you* any suspicion, Mr. Monckton?" he added, after a moment's pause.

The lawyer sighed heavily.

"No," he said, giving the paper back to the clerk; "I believe the will is genuine."

Just at this moment there was a stir in the assembly, and Gilbert Monckton turned round to see what was taking place.

It was Mrs. Jepcott, the housekeeper, who was saying something to which everybody listened intently.

The reason of this attention which the housekeeper's smallest word received from every member of that assembly, was the fact that she held a paper in her hand. Every eye was fixed upon this paper. It might be a codicil revoking the will, and making an entirely new disposition of the property.

Faint streaks of red began to light up the wan cheeks of the two old maids, and Launcelot Darrell grew more livid than death. But it was not a codicil; it was only a letter written by

Maurice de Crespigny, and addressed to his three nieces.

"The night before my poor dear master died," the housekeeper said, "I was sitting up with him all alone, and he called me to him, and he told me to fetch him his dressing-gown, which he'd been wearing all through his illness, whenever he sat up; and I fetched it; and he took a sealed letter out of the breast-pocket, and he said to me, 'Jepcott, when my will is read, I expect my three nieces will be very much disappointed and will think I have not treated them fairly; so I've written them a letter, begging them not to be angry with me after I'm dead and gone; and I want you to keep it, and take care of it, until the will has been read, and then give it to my eldest niece, Sarah, to read aloud to her two sisters in the presence of everybody.' And this is the letter, Miss," added Mrs. Jepcott, handing the sealed letter to Sarah de Crespigny.

"Thank God!" thought Gilbert Monckton, "I shall know now whether the will is genuine. If it is a fabrication, this letter must bring detection upon the forger."

CHAPTER X.

DESERTED.

THE letter written by the old man to his three nieces was read aloud by Miss Sarah in the presence of the eager assembly. Amongst all those anxious listeners there was no one who listened more intently than Gilbert Monckton.

Maurice de Crespigny's letter was not a long one.

"MY DEAR NIECES—SARAH, LAVINIA, AND ELLEN,—

"You will all three be perhaps much surprised at the manner in which I have disposed of my estate, both real and personal; but believe me that in acting as I have done I have been prompted by no unkind feeling against you; nor am I otherwise than duly grateful for the attention which I have received from you during my declining years.

"I think that I have done my duty; but be that as it may, I have done that which it has been my fixed intention to do for the last ten years. I have made several wills, and destroyed one after another, but they have all been in the main point to the same effect; and it has only been an old man's whimsical fancy that has prompted me to make sundry alterations in minor details. The income of two hundred a year which I have left to each of you will, I know, be more than enough for your simple wants. The three incomes, by the wording of my will, will descend to my nephew, Launcelot Darrell, after your deaths.

"I have tried to remember many old friends who have perhaps long ere this forgotten me, or who may laugh at an old man's foolish bequests.

"I do not believe that I have wronged any one; and I trust that you will think kindly of me when I am in my grave, and never speak bitterly of

"Your affectionate uncle,

"MAURICE DE CRESPIGNY.

"*Woodlands, February 20th.*"

This was the old man's letter. There was not

one syllable of its contents which in any way disagreed with the wording of the will.

Launcelot Darrell drew a long breath; and his mother, sitting close to him, with her hand in his, could feel the clammy coldness of his fingers, and hear the loud thumping of his heart against his breast.

Gilbert Monckton took up his hat and walked out of the room. He did not want to have any explanation with the man whom he fully believed —in spite of all Eleanor had said—to be the fortunate rival who had robbed him of every chance of ever winning his wife's heart.

He had only one feeling now; and that was the same feeling which had taken possession of him twenty years before—an eager desire to run away, to escape from his troubles and perplexities, to get free of this horrible atmosphere of deceit and bewilderment; to cast every hope, every dream behind; and to go out into the world once more, joyless, unloved, hopeless; but at any rate, not the dupe of a false woman's specious pretences.

He went straight back to Tolldale while the crowd at Woodlands slowly dispersed, more or less discontented with the day's proceedings.

He went back to the grand old mansion in which he had never known happiness. He asked whether his wife was with Miss Mason. No, the man told him; Mrs. Monckton was in her own room, lying down.

This was the very thing he wished. He didn't want to see Eleanor's beautiful face, framed in shining bands of hazel-brown hair; that irresistible face whose influence he dared not trust. He wanted to see his ward alone.

Laura ran out of her dressing-room at the sound of her guardian's footstep.

"Well?" she cried, "is it a forgery?"

"Hush, Laura, go back into your room."

Miss Mason obeyed, and Mr. Monckton followed her into the pretty little apartment, which was a modern bower of shining maple-wood and flowery chintz, and flimsy lace and muslin, frivolous and airy as the young lady herself.

"Sit down in a comfortable seat, guardian," said Laura, offering the lawyer a slippery chintz-covered lounging-chair, so low as to bring Mr. Monckton's knees inconveniently near his chin as he sat in it. "Sit down and tell me all about it, for goodness gracious sake. *Is* it forged?"

"I don't know, my dear, whether the will is genuine or not. It would be a very difficult question to decide."

"But oh! good gracious me," exclaimed Miss Mason, "how can you be so unkind as to talk about it like that, as if it didn't matter a bit whether the will is forged or not. If it isn't forged, Launcelot isn't bad; and if he isn't bad, of course I may marry him, and the wedding things won't be all wasted. I knew that something would happen to make everything come right."

"Laura," cried Mr. Monckton, "you must not talk like this. Do you know that you are no longer a child, and that you are dealing with the most solemn business in a woman's life? I do not know whether the will by which Launcelot Darrell inherits the Woodlands property is genuine or not; I certainly have reason to *think* that it *is* genuine, but I will not take upon myself to speak positively. But however that may be, I know that he is not a good man, and you shall never marry him with my consent."

The young lady began to cry, and murmured something to the effect that it was cruel to use

her so when she was ill, and had been taking oceans of lime-draughts; but Mr. Monckton was inflexible.

"If you were to have a dozen illnesses such as this," he said, "they would not turn me from my purpose, or alter my determination. When I voluntarily took upon myself the custody of your life, Laura, I undertook that charge with the intention of accomplishing it as a sacred duty. I have faltered in that duty; for I suffered you to betroth yourself to a man whom I have never been able to trust. But it is not yet too late to repair that error. You shall never marry Launcelot Darrell."

"Why not? If he didn't commit a forgery, as Eleanor says he did, why shouldn't I marry him?"

"Because he has never truly loved you, Laura. You admit that he was Eleanor's suitor before he was yours? You admit that, do you not?"

Miss Mason pouted, and sobbed, and choked once or twice before she answered. Gilbert Monckton waited impatiently for her reply. He was about as fit to play the mentor as the young lady whom he had taken upon himself to

lecture. He was blinded and maddened by passionate regret, cruel disappointment, wounded pride, every feeling which is most calculated to paralyse a man's reasoning powers, and transform a Solomon into a fool.

"Yes," Laura gasped at last; "he did propose to Eleanor first, certainly. But then, she led him on."

"She led him on!" cried Mr. Monckton. "How?"

Laura looked at him with a perplexed expression of countenance, before she replied to this eager question.

"Oh, *you* know!" she said, after a pause; "I can't exactly describe *how* she led him on, but she *did* lead him on. She walked with him, and she talked to him; they were always talking together and leaving me out of the conversation, which was very rude of them, to say the least, for if I wasn't intellectual enough for them, and couldn't quite understand what they were talking about—for Launcelot would talk meta——what's its name? you know; and who *could* understand such conversation as that?—they might have talked about things I *do* understand, such as Byron and Tennyson. And then she took an

interest in his pictures, and talked about chiaro—thingembob, and foreshortening, and middle distances, and things, just like an artist. And then she used to let him smoke in the breakfast parlour when she was giving me my music lessons; and I should like to know who *could* play cinquapated passages in time, with the smell of tobacco in their nose, and a fidgetty young man reading a crackling newspaper, and killing flies with his pocket handkerchief against the window. And then she sat for Rosalind in his picture. But, good gracious me, it's no good going all over it; she led him on."

Mr. Monckton sighed. There wasn't much in what his ward had said, but there was quite enough. Eleanor and Launcelot had been happy and confidential together. They had talked of metaphysics, and literature, and poetry, and painting. The young artist had lounged away the summer mornings, smoking and idling, in Miss Vane's society.

There was very little in all this, certainly, but quite as much as there generally is in the history of a modern love affair. The age of romance is gone, with tournaments, and troubadours, and knight errantry; and if a young gentleman now-

a-days spends money in the purchase of a private box at Covent Garden, and an extra guinea for a bouquet, or procures tickets for a fashionable flower show, and is content to pass the better part of his mornings amidst the expensive litter of a drawing-room, watching the white fingers of his beloved in the messy mysteries of *Decalcomanie*, he may be supposed to be quite as sincerely devoted as if he were to plant his lady's point-lace parasol cover in his helmet, and gallop away with a view to having his head split open in her service.

Mr. Monckton hid his face in his hands, and pondered over what he had heard. Yes, his ward's foolish talk revealed to him all the secrets of his wife's heart. He could see the pretty, sunny morning room, the young man lounging in the open window, with fluttering rose-leaves all about his handsome head. He could see Eleanor seated at the piano, making believe to listen to her pupil, and glancing back at her lover. He made the prettiest cabinet picture out of these materials for his own torment.

"Do you think Eleanor ever loved Launcelot Darrell?" he asked, by-and-by.

"*Do* I think so?" cried Miss Mason. "Why,

'of course I do; and that's why she tries to persuade me not to marry him. I love her, and she's very good to me," Laura added, hastily, half ashamed of having spoken unkindly of the friend who had been so patient with her during the last few days. "I love her very dearly; but if she hadn't cared for Launcelot Darrell, why did she go against my marrying him?"

Gilbert Monckton groaned aloud. Yes, it must be so. Eleanor had loved Launcelot, and her sudden anger, her violent emotion, had arisen out of her jealousy. She was not a devoted daughter, nursing a dream of vengeance against her dead father's foe; but a jealous and vindictive woman, bent upon avenging an infidelity against herself.

"Laura," said Mr. Monckton, "call your maid, and tell her to pack your things without a moment's delay."

"But why?"

"I am going to take you abroad,—immediately."

"Oh, good gracious! And Eleanor—"

"Eleanor will stay here. You and I will go to Nice, Laura, and cure ourselves of our follies—if we can. Don't bring any unnecessary load of luggage. Have your most useful dresses and

your linen packed in a couple of portmanteaus, and let all be ready in an hour's time. We must leave Windsor by the four-o'clock train."

"And my wedding things—what am I to do with them?"

"Pack them up. Burn them, if you like," answered Gilbert Monckton, leaving his ward to get over her astonishment as she best might.

He encountered her maid in the passage.

"Miss Mason's portmanteau must be packed in an hour, Jane," he said. "I am going to take her away at once for change of air."

Mr. Monckton went down-stairs to his study, and shutting himself in, wrote a very long letter, the composition of which seemed to give him a great deal of trouble.

He looked at his watch when this letter was finished, folded, and addressed. It was a quarter past two. He went up-stairs once more to Laura's dressing-room, and found that young lady in the wildest state of confusion, doing all in her power to hinder her maid, under the pretence of assisting her.

"Put on your bonnet and shawl and go down-stairs, Laura," Mr. Monckton said decisively. "Jane will never succeed in packing those port-

manteaus while you are fidgeting her. Go down into the drawing-room, and wait there till the boxes are packed and we're ready to start."

"But mustn't I go and say good-by to Eleanor?"

"Is she still in her own room?"

"Yes, sir," the maid answered, looking up from the portmanteau before which she was kneeling. "I peeped into Mrs. Monckton's room just now, and she was fast asleep. She has had a great deal of fatigue in nursing Miss Mason."

"Very well, then, she had better not be disturbed."

"But if I'm going to Nice," remonstrated Laura, "I can't go so far away without saying good-bye to Eleanor. She has been very kind to me, you know."

"I have changed my mind," Mr. Monckton said; "I've been thinking over the matter, and I've decided on not taking you to Nice. Torquay will do just as well."

Miss Mason made a wry face.

"I thought I was to have change of scene," she said; "Torquay isn't change of scene, for I went there once when I was a child. I might have forgotten Launcelot in quite a strange place,

where people talk bad French and wear wooden shoes, and everything is different; but I shall never forget him at Torquay."

Gilbert Monckton did not notice his ward's lamentation.

"Miss Mason will want you with her, Jane," he said to the girl. "You will get yourself ready, please, as soon as you've packed those portmanteaus."

He went down-stairs again, gave his orders about a carriage to take him to the station, and then walked up and down the drawing-room waiting for his ward.

In half-an-hour both she and her maid were ready. The portmanteaus were put into the carriage—the mail-phaeton which had brought Eleanor to Hazlewood two years before—and Mr. Monckton drove away from Tolldale Priory without having uttered a word of adieu to his wife.

CHAPTER XI.

GILBERT'S LETTER.

It was late in the afternoon when Eleanor awoke, aroused by the clanging of the dinner-bell in the cupola above her head. She had been worn out by her patient attendance upon Laura during the last week, and had slept very heavily, in spite of her anxiety to hear what had happened at the reading of the will. She had seen very little of her husband since the night of Mr. de Crespigny's death, and, though the coldness and restraint of his manner had much distressed her, she had no idea that he was actually alienated from her, or that he had suffered his mind to become filled with suspicions against her.

She opened the door of her room, went out into the corridor, and listened. But all was very still. She could only hear the faint jingling of glass and silver in the hall below, as the old butler

went to and fro putting the finishing touches to the dinner-table.

"Mr. Monckton might have come to me to tell me about the will," she thought: "he must surely know how anxious I am to hear what has been done."

She bathed her flushed face, and dressed for dinner as usual. She put on a black silk dress out of respect for her father's friend, whose funeral had been solemnised during her sleep, and with a black lace shawl upon her shoulders she went down-stairs to look for her husband.

She found all very quiet—unnaturally quiet. It is strange how soon the absence of an accustomed inhabitant makes itself felt in a house, however quiet the habits of that missing person. Eleanor looked into the drawing-room and the study, and found them both empty.

"Where is Mr. Monckton?" she asked of the old butler.

"Gone, ma'am."

"Gone!"

"Yes, ma'am; two hours ago, a'most. You knew he was going, didn't you, ma'am?"

The old man's curiosity was excited by Eleanor's look of surprise.

"Didn't you know as master was a-going to take Miss Mason away to the seaside for change of air, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, I knew that he was going to do so, but not immediately. Did Mr. Monckton leave no message for me?"

"He left a letter, ma'am. It's on the mantelpiece in the study."

Eleanor went to her husband's room with her heart beating high, and her cheeks flushed with indignation against him for the slight he had put upon her. Yes; there was the letter, sealed with his signet-ring. He was not generally in the habit of sealing his letters, so he must have looked upon this as one of some importance. Mrs. Monckton tore open the envelope. She turned pale as she read the first few lines of the letter. It was written over two sheets of note paper, and began thus:—

"ELEANOR,—

"When I asked you to be my wife I told you that in my early youth I had been deceived by a woman whom I loved very dearly, though not as dearly as I have since loved you. I told you this, and I implored you to remember my

blighted youth, and to have pity upon me. I entreated you to spare me the anguish of a second betrayal, a second awakening from my dream of happiness.

"Surely, if you had not been the most cruel of women, you would have been touched by the knowledge that I had already suffered so bitterly from a woman's treachery, and you would have had mercy upon me. But you had no mercy. It suited you to come back to this neighbourhood, to be near your former lover, Launcelot Darrell."

The letter dropped from Eleanor's hands as she read these words.

"My former lover!" she cried; "my lover, Launcelot Darrell! Can my husband think that? *Can* he think that I ever loved Launcelot Darrell?"

She picked up the letter, and seated herself at her husband's writing-table. Then she deliberately reperused the first page of the lawyer's epistle.

"How could he write such a letter?" she exclaimed indignantly. "How could he think such cruel things of me after I had told him the

truth—after I had revealed the secret of my life?"

She went on with the letter:—

"From the hour of our return to Tolldale, Eleanor," wrote Gilbert Monckton, "I knew the truth—the hard and cruel truth—very difficult for a man to believe, when he has built up his life and mapped out a happy future under the influence of a delusion which leaves him desolate when it melts away. I knew the worst. I watched you as a man only watches the woman upon whose truth his every hope depends, and I saw that you still loved Launcelot Darrell. By a hundred evidences, small in themselves, but damning when massed together, you betrayed your secret. You had made a mercenary marriage, looking to worldly advantages to counterbalance your sacrifice of feeling; and you found too late that the sacrifice was too hard for you to bear.

"I watched you day by day, and hour by hour; and I saw that as the time for Laura's marriage approached, you grew hourly more unhappy, more restless, more impatient and capricious in your manner towards Launcelot.

"On the night of Maurice de Crespigny's death the storm burst. You met Launcelot Darrell in the Woodlands garden—perhaps by chance, perhaps by appointment. You tried to dissuade him against the marriage with Laura, as you had tried to dissuade Laura from marrying him; and, failing in this, you gave way to a frenzy of jealousy, and accused your false lover of an impossible crime.

"Remember, Eleanor, I accuse you of no deadly sin, no *deliberate* treachery to me. The wrong you have done me lies in the fact that you married me, while your heart was still given to another. I give you credit for having tried to conquer that fatal attachment, and I attribute your false accusations against Launcelot Darrell to a mad impulse of jealousy, rather than the studied design of a base woman. I try to think well of you, Eleanor, for I have loved you most dearly; and the new life that I had made for myself owed all its brightness to my hope of winning your regard. But it is not to be so. I bow my head to the decree, and I release you from a bond that has no doubt grown odious to you.

"I beg you, therefore, to write me a final letter,

demanding such terms of separation as you may think fit. Let the ground of our parting be incompatibility of temper. Everything shall be done to render your position honourable; and I trust to you to preserve the name of Gilbert Monckton's wife without taint or blemish. Signora Picirillo will no doubt act for you in this business, and consent to assume the position of your guardian and friend. I leave you in full possession of Tolldale Priory; and I go to Torquay with my ward, whence I shall depart for the Continent as soon as our separation has been adjusted, and my business arrangements made.

"My address for the next fortnight will be the Post-office, Torquay.

"GILBERT MONCKTON."

This was the letter which the lawyer had written to his young wife. Its contents were like a thunderbolt in the shock which they caused to Eleanor's senses. She sat for a long time reading it over and over again. For the first time since her marriage she put aside the thought of her revenge, and began to think seriously of something else.

It was too cruel. Unmixed indignation was the feeling which took possession of her mind. She had no comprehension of the despair which had filled Gilbert Monckton's breast as he wrote that farewell letter. She did not know how the strong man had done battle with his suspicions, struggling with every new doubt, and conquering it as it arose, only to be conquered himself at last, by the irresistible force of circumstances, every one of which seemed a new evidence against his wife. Eleanor could not know this. She only knew that her husband had most bitterly wronged her, and she could feel nothing but indignation—yet.

She tore the letter into a hundred fragments. She wanted to annihilate its insulting accusations. How dared he think so vilely of her? Then a feeling of despair sank into her breast, like some actual burden, chill and heavy, that bowed her down to the earth, and for the time paralysed her energies.

Nothing but failure had met her upon every side. She had been too late in her attempt to see Maurice de Crespigny before his death. She had failed to prove Launcelot Darrell's guilt; though the evidence of his crime had been in her

hands, though she had been herself the witness of his wrong-doing. Everything had been against her. The chance which had thrown her across the pathway of the very man she wished to meet, had only given rise to delusive hopes, and had resulted in utter defeat.

And now she found herself suspected and deserted by her husband,—the man whom she had loved and respected with every better feeling of a generous nature that had become warped and stunted by the all-absorbing motive of her life. In her indignation against Gilbert Monckton, her hatred of Launcelot Darrell became even more bitter than before, for it was he who had caused all this—it was he whose treachery had been the blight of her existence, from the hour of her father's death until now.

While Eleanor sat thinking over her husband's letter, the old butler came to announce dinner, which had been waiting some time for her coming. I fancy the worthy retainer had been prowling about the hall meanwhile with the hope of surprising the clue to some domestic mystery in his mistress's face as she emerged from the study.

Mrs. Monckton went into the dining-room and made a show of eating her dinner. She had a motive for doing this, beyond the desire to keep up appearances which seems natural even to the most impulsive people. She wanted to hear all about Mr. de Crespigny's will, and she knew that Jeffreys, the butler, was sure to be pretty well informed upon the subject.

She took her accustomed seat at the dinner-table, and Mr. Jeffreys placed himself behind her. She took a spoonful of clear soup, and then began to trifle with her spoon.

"Have you heard about Mr. de Crespigny's will, Jeffreys?" she asked.

"Well, ma'am, to tell the truth, we had Mr. Banks, the baker, from Hazlewood village, in the servants' hall not a quarter of an hour ago, and he *do* say that Mr. Darrell has got all his great-uncle's estate, real and personil,—leastways, with the exception of hannuities to the two old mai—the Miss de Crespignys, ma'am, and bein' uncommon stingy in their dealin's, no one will regret as *they* don't come into the fortune. Sherry, ma'am, or 'ock?"

Eleanor touched one of the glasses before her almost mechanically, and waited while the old

man—who was not so skilful and rapid as he had been in the time of Gilbert Monckton's father—poured out some wine and removed her soup-plate.

"Yes, ma'am," he continued, "Banks of Hazlewood do say that Mr. Darrell have got the fortune. He heard it from Mrs. Darrell's 'ouse-maid, which Mrs. Darrell told all the servants directly as she come back from Woodlands, and were all of a tremble like with joy," the 'ouse-maid said; but Mr. Launcelot, he were as white as a sheet, and hadn't a word to say to any one, except the foreign gentleman that he is so friendly with."

Eleanor paid very little attention to all these details. She only thought of the main fact. The desperate game which Launcelot had played had been successful. The victory was his.

Mrs. Monckton went from the dinner-table to her own room, and with her own hands dragged a portmanteau out of a roomy old-fashioned lumber-closet, and began to pack her plainest dresses and the necessaries of her simple toilet.

"I will leave Tolldale to-morrow morning," she said. "I will at least prove to Mr. Monckton that I do not wish to enjoy the benefits of a

mercenary marriage. I will leave this place and begin the world again. Richard was right; my dream of vengeance was a foolish dream. I suppose it is right, after all, that wicked people should succeed in this world, and we must be content to stand by and see them triumph."

Eleanor could not think without some bitterness of Laura's abrupt departure. *She* could not have been actuated by the same motives that had influenced Gilbert Monckton. Why, then, had she left without a word of farewell? Why, Launcelot Darrell was the cause of this sorrow as well as of every other, for it was jealousy about him that had prejudiced Laura against her friend.

Early the next morning Eleanor Monckton left Tolldale Priory. She went to the station at Windsor in a pony carriage which had been reserved for the use of herself and Laura Mason. She took with her only one portmanteau, her desk, and dressing-case.

"I am going alone, Martin," she said to the maid whom Mr. Monckton had engaged to attend upon her. "You know that I am accustomed to wait upon myself, and I do not think you could be accommodated where I am going."

"But you will not be away long, ma'am, shall you?" the young woman asked.

"I don't know. I cannot tell you. I have written to Mr. Monckton," Eleanor answered hurriedly.

In the bleak early spring morning she left the home in which she had known very little happiness. She looked back at the stately old-fashioned mansion with a regretful sigh.

How happy she *might* have been within those ivied walls! How happy she might have been with her husband and Laura; but for the one hindering cause, the one fatal obstacle—Launcelot Darrell. She thought of what her life might have been, but for the remembrance of that solemn vow which was perpetually urging her on to its fulfilment. The love of a good man, the caressing affection of a gentle girl, the respect of every living creature round about her, might have been hers; but for Launcelot Darrell.

She looked back at the old house, gleaming redly behind the leafless branches of the bare oaks that sheltered it. She could see the oriel window of the morning-room that Gilbert Monckton had furnished on purpose for her, the dark crimson of the voluminous curtains,

and a Parian statuette, of his own choosing, glittering whitely against the red light of the fire within. She saw all this, and regretted it; but her pride was soothed by the thought that she was running away from this luxurious home, and all its elegance, to go out alone into a bleak uncomfortable world.

"He shall know, at least, that I did not marry him for the sake of a fine house and horses and carriages," she thought, as she watched the terrace chimneys disappear behind the trees. "However meanly he thinks of me, he shall have no cause to think that."

It was still very early in the day when Eleanor arrived in London. She was determined not to go to the Signora, since she must relate all that had happened, and would no doubt have considerable difficulty in convincing her old friend that she had chosen the right course.

"The Signora would want me to go back to Tolldale, and to try and justify myself in the opinion of Gilbert Monckton," Eleanor thought. "But I will never humiliate myself to him. He has wronged me; and the consequences of that wrong must rest upon his own head."

You see, this young lady's nature was as un-

disciplined as it had been in her girlhood, when she flung herself on her knees in the little Parisian chamber to take an oath of vengeance against her father's destroyer. She had not yet learnt to submit. She had not yet learnt the most sublime lesson that the Gospel teaches, to suffer unmerited wrong, and "take it patiently."

The letter she had written to Gilbert Monckton was very brief.

"Gilbert," she wrote, "you have most cruelly wronged me, and I cannot doubt that the day will come in which you will know how baseless your suspicions have been. Every word that I uttered in Mr. de Crespigny's house upon the night of his death was true. I am quite powerless to prove my truth, and I cannot be content to see Launcelot Darrell triumph. The mystery of the lost will is more than I can comprehend, but I declare that it was in my possession five minutes before I met you in the garden. If ever that will should be found, my justification will be found with it. I look to you to watch my interests in this matter, but I am quite incapable of remaining an inmate of your house while you think me the base creature I should be if my

accusations against Launcelot Darrell were in the slightest degree false. I will never return to Tolldale until my truth has been proved. You need not fear that I will do anything to bring discredit upon your name. I go out into the world to get my own living, as I have done before.

"ELEANOR MONCKTON."

This letter expressed very little of the indignation which filled Eleanor's breast. Her pride revolted against the outrage which her husband had inflicted upon her; and she suffered all the more acutely because beneath her apparent indifference there lurked, in the innermost recesses of her heart, a true and pure affection for this cruel Gilbert Monckton, whose causeless suspicions had so deeply wounded her.

In proportion to the strength of her love was the force of her indignation, and she went away from Tolldale with angry thoughts raging in her breast, and buoying her up with a factitious courage.

This influence was still at work when she reached London. She had only a few pounds in her purse, and it was necessary therefore that

she should begin to get her own living immediately. She had thought of this during her journey between Windsor and London, and had determined what to do. She took a cab, and drove to a quiet little hotel in the neighbourhood of the Strand, left her portmanteau and other packages there, and then walked to a certain institution for governesses in the neighbourhood of Cavendish Square. She had been there before, during her residence with the Signora, to make an inquiry about pupils for the pianoforte, but had never given her name to the principal.

"I must call myself by a new name," she thought, "if I want to hide myself from Gilbert Monckton and from the Signora. I must write to her directly, by-the-by, poor dear, and tell her that I am safe and well; or else she will be making herself unhappy about me, directly she hears I have left Tolldale."

The principal of the Governesses' Institution was a stately maiden lady, with a rustling silk dress and glossy braids of grey hair under a cap of point lace. She received Eleanor with solemn graciousness, demanded her requirements and her qualifications, and then, with a gold pencil-

case poised lightly between the tips of her taper fingers, deliberated for a few minutes.

Eleanor sat opposite to her, watching her face very anxiously. She wanted some home, some asylum, some hiding-place from a world that seemed altogether against her. She scarcely cared where or what the place of refuge might be. She wanted to get away from Gilbert Monckton, who had wronged and insulted her; and from Launcelot Darrell, whose treachery was always strong enough to triumph over the truth.

But of course she didn't say this. She only said that she wanted a situation as musical governess, nursery governess, or companion, and that the amount of salary was of very little importance to her.

"I understand," the lady principal replied, slowly, "I perfectly understand your feeling, Miss—Miss—"

"My name is Villars," Eleanor answered quickly, looking down at her muff as she spoke.

The lady principal's eyes followed hers, and looked at the muff too. It was a very handsome sable muff, which had cost five-and-twenty pounds, and had been given by Mr. Monckton

to his wife at the beginning of the winter. It was not at all in accord with Eleanor's plain merino dress and woollen shawl, or with her desire to go out as a governess without consideration of salary. Miss Barkham, the lady principal, began to look rather suspiciously at her visitor's handsome face, and forgot to finish the sentence she had commenced.

"You can command excellent references, Miss Villars, I suppose?" she said, coldly.

Eleanor flushed crimson. Here was an insurmountable difficulty at the very outset.

"References," she stammered, "will references be necessary?"

"Most decidedly. We could not think of sending out any young lady from this establishment who could not command first-class references or testimonials. Some people are satisfied with written testimonials; for myself, I consider a personal reference indispensable, and I would not upon my own authority engage any lady without one."

Eleanor looked very much distressed. She had no idea of diplomatising or prevaricating. She blurted out the truth all at once, unappalled by the stern glances of Miss Barkham.

"I can't possibly give you a reference," she said; "my friends do not know that I am in search of a situation, and they must not know it. I assure you that I belong to a very respectable family, and am quite competent to do what I profess to do."

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. MAJOR LENNARD.

Miss Barkham stared at her visitor with a look of mingled horror and astonishment.

"You do not surely imagine, Miss Villars," she said, "that anybody will engage you in the responsible position of governess to their children upon no better recommendation than your own, I must confess, rather *confident* assertion of your merits?"

"I never told a falsehood in my life, Miss Barkham," Eleanor answered indignantly. "If I am without a friend whom I can ask to testify to my respectability, it is on account of circumstances which—"

"To be sure," exclaimed Miss Barkham; "that is the very thing we have to contend against. This establishment is completely overrun by young ladies who think there is nothing easier than to turn their backs upon their friends

and their homes, and go out into the world to become the instructresses of the rising generation. You think me very punctilious and strait-laced, I daresay, Miss Villars; but I don't know what would become of the rising generation if *somebody* didn't keep watch and ward over the doors of the schoolroom. Young ladies who choose to feel unhappy in the society of their parents; young ladies who are disappointed in some sentimental affection; young ladies who fancy themselves ill-used by their elder sisters; young ladies who, from the very shallowness of their own minds, cannot be contented anywhere, all come to us, and want to go out as governesses,—just for a change, they say, in the hope of finding a little employment that will divert their minds; as if they had any minds to be diverted! These are the amateur hangers-on of a very grave and respectable profession, to which hundreds of estimable and accomplished women have devoted the best and brightest years of their lives. These are the ignorant and superficial pretenders who bring their cheap and worthless wares into the market, in order to undersell the painstaking and patient teachers who have themselves learned the lessons they

profess to teach. And these amateurs will continue to flourish, Miss Villars, so long as ladies, who would shudder at the idea of entrusting an expensive silk dress to an incompetent dressmaker, are willing to confide the care of their children to an instructress whose highest merit lies in the fact that she is—cheap. I do not wish to wound your feelings, Miss Villars; but I assure you I often feel sick at heart, when I see a lady who offers thirty years' experience, and all the treasures of a mind carefully and sedulously cultivated, rejected in favour of some chit of nineteen who can play one showy fantasia, and disfigure glass vases with scraps of painted paper, and who will accept twenty pounds a year in payment of services that are not worth five."

Eleanor smiled at Miss Barkham's energetic protest.

"I daresay you are often very much worried by incompetent people," she said; "but I assure you *I* have made no attempt to deceive you. I don't profess to do much, you know. I believe I can play pretty well. May I play you something?" she asked, pointing to an open pianoforte at one end of the room, a handsome grand, with

all Erard's patent improvements, on which governesses upon their promotion were in the habit of showing off.

"I have no objection to hear you play," Miss Barkham answered; "but remember, I cannot possibly procure you a situation without either references or testimonials."

Eleanor went to the piano, took off her gloves, and ran her fingers over the keys. She had played very little during the last few months, for in the feverish preoccupation of her mind she had been unequal to any feminine employment; too restless and unsettled to do anything but roam about the house, or sit brooding silently, with her hands lying idle in her lap.

The familiar touch of the keys filled her with a strange pleasure; she was surprised at the brilliancy of her execution, as good players often are after an interval of idleness. She played one of Beethoven's most sparkling sonatas; and even Miss Barkham, who was perpetually listening to such performances, murmured a few words of praise.

But before Eleanor had been seated at the piano more than five minutes, a servant came into the room and presented a card to Miss Barkham,

who rose from her seat with some appearance of vexation.

"Really, I scarcely know what to do about it," she muttered to herself. "It's almost impossible to arrange anything at such very short notice. Excuse me, Miss Villars," she added, aloud, to Eleanor, "I am obliged to see a lady in the next room. Don't go until I return."

Eleanor bowed, and went on playing. She finished the sonata; and then, suddenly catching sight of her wedding-ring and the thick band of gold studded with diamonds that her husband had given her on her wedding-day, she stopped to draw the two rings off her finger, and put them into her purse amongst the few sovereigns that formed her whole stock of worldly wealth.

She sighed as she did this, for it seemed like putting off her old life altogether.

"It's better so," she said to herself; "I know now that Gilbert must have thought me false to him from the very first. I can understand his cold reserve *now*, though it used to puzzle me so much. He changed almost immediately after our marriage."

Eleanor Monckton grew very pensive as she remembered that she had been perhaps herself to

blame for the altered manner, and no doubt equally altered feelings, of her husband. She had neglected her duty as a wife, absorbed in her affection as a daughter; she had sacrificed the living to the dead; and she began to think that Richard Thornton's advice had been wiser than she had believed when she refused to listen to it. She had been wrong altogether. Classic vows of vengeance were all very well in the days when a Medea rode upon flying dragons and slaughtered her children upon principle; but a certain inspired teacher, writing a very long time after that much-to-be-regretted classic age, has declared that vengeance is the right of divinity alone, and far too terrible an attribute to be tampered with by fallible mortals, blindly hurling the bolts of Heaven against each other's earthly heads.

She thought this, and grew very melancholy and uncomfortable, and began to fancy that her impulses had been about the worst guides that she could have chosen. She began to think that she had not acted so very wisely in running away from Tolldale Priory in the first heat of her indignation, and that she might have done better perhaps by writing a temperate letter of justification to Gilbert Monckton, and quietly

abiding the issue. But she had chosen her path now, and must stand by her choice, on pain of appearing the weakest and most cowardly of women.

"My letter is posted," she said to herself. "Gilbert will receive it to-morrow morning. I *should* be a coward to go back; for, however much I may have been to blame in the matter, he has treated me very badly."

She wiped away some tears that had come into her eyes as she took the rings from her wedding finger, and then began to play again.

This time she dashed into one of the liveliest and most brilliant fantasias she could remember, a very *pot pourri* of airs; a scientific hodge-podge of Scotch melodies; now joyous, now warlike and savage, now plaintive and tender; always capricious in the extreme, and running away every now and then into the strangest variations, the most eccentric cadences. The piece was one of Thalberg's *chef-d'œuvres,* and Eleanor played it magnificently. As she struck the final chords, sharp and rapid as a rattling peal of musketry, Miss Barkham re-entered the room.

She had the air of being rather annoyed, and she hesitated a little before speaking to Eleanor,

who rose from the piano and began to put on her gloves.

"Really, Miss Villars," she said, "it is most incomprehensible to me, but since Mrs. Lennard herself wishes it, I—"

She stopped and fidgeted a little with the gold pencil-case hanging to her watch-chain.

"I can't at all understand this sort of thing," she resumed; "however, of course I wash my hands of all responsibility. Have you any objection to travel, Miss Villars?" she asked suddenly.

Eleanor opened her eyes with a look of astonishment at this abrupt question.

"Objection to travel?" she repeated; "I—"

"Have you any objection to go abroad—to Paris, for instance—if I could obtain you a situation?"

"Oh, no," Eleanor answered, with a sigh, "not at all; I would just as soon go to Paris as anywhere else."

"Very well, then, if that is the case, I think I can get you a situation immediately. There is a lady in the next room who was here yesterday, and who really gave me a most severe headache with her fidgety, childish ways. However, she

wants to meet with a young lady as a companion *immediately*—that is the grand difficulty. She leaves London for Paris by this evening's mail, and she put off engaging the person she required until yesterday afternoon, when she came to me in a fever of anxiety, and wanted me to introduce her to a lady instanter. She stopped all the afternoon in the next room, and I took ever so many young ladies in to her, all of whom seemed well qualified for the situation, which really demands very little. But not one of them would suit Mrs. Lennard. She was very polite to them, and made all kinds of affable speeches to them, and dismissed them in the most ladylike manner; and then she told me afterwards that she didn't take a fancy to them, and she was determined not to engage any one she didn't take a fancy to, as she wanted to be very fond of her companion, and make quite a sister of her. That was what she said, and, good gracious me," cried Miss Barkham, "how am I to find her somebody she can take a fancy to, and make a sister of, at a quarter-of-an-hour's notice? I assure you, Miss Villars, my head felt quite in a whirl after she went away yesterday afternoon; and it's beginning to be in a whirl again now."

Eleanor waited very patiently while Miss Barkham endeavoured to collect her scattered senses.

"I can scarcely hope this very capricious lady will take a fancy to me," she said, smiling.

"Why, my dear," exclaimed Miss Barkham, "that's the very thing I came to tell you. She *has* taken a fancy to you."

"Taken a fancy to me!" repeated Eleanor; "but she has not seen me."

"Of course not, my dear. But she really is the most confusing, I may almost say bewildering, person I ever remember meeting with. I was in the next room talking to this Mrs. Lennard, who is very pretty and fashionable-looking, only a little untidy in her dress, when you began to play that Scotch fantasia. Mrs. Lennard stopped to listen, and after she had listened a few moments, she cried out suddenly, 'Now, I dare say that's an old frump?' I said, 'What, ma'am?' for, upon my word, my dear, I didn't know whether she meant the piece, or the piano, or what. 'I dare say the lady who's playing is an old frump,' she said. 'Old frumps almost always play well; in point of fact, old frumps are generally very clever. But I'm determined not to have any one I can't make a sister of; and I *must* have one by three o'clock

this afternoon, or Major Lennard will be cross, and I shall go mad.' Well, Miss Villars, I told Mrs. Lennard your age, and described your appearance and manners, that is to say, as well as I was able to do so after our very brief acquaintance, and I had no sooner finished, than she exclaimed, 'That will do; if she can play Scotch melodies like that, and is nice, I'll engage her.' I then explained to Mrs. Lennard that you could give no references; 'and that of course,' I added, 'would be an insuperable objection;' but she interrupted me in a manner that would have appeared very impertinent in any one but her, and cried out, 'Insuperable fiddlesticks! If she's nice, I'll engage her. She can play to me all the morning while I paint upon velvet;' and you're to come with me, please Miss Villars, and be introduced to her."

Eleanor took up her muff and followed Miss Barkham on to the landing, but at this moment three ladies appeared upon the top stair, and the principal of the establishment was called upon to receive them.

"If you'll go in by yourself, my dear," she whispered to Eleanor, pointing to the door of the back drawing-room, "I shall be much obliged; you'll find Mrs. Lennard a most affable person."

Eleanor readily assented. She opened the door and went into the primly-furnished back drawing-room. Mrs. Major Lennard was a little woman, and she was standing on tiptoe upon the hearth-rug, in order to survey herself in the chimney-glass while she re-arranged the pale blue strings of her black velvet bonnet. Eleanor paused near the door, waiting for her to turn round, and wondering what she was like, as the face in the glass was not visible from where Mrs. Monckton stood.

The lady employed a considerable time in the important operation of tying her bonnet-strings, then suddenly hearing the rustling of Eleanor's dress as she advanced a few paces, Mrs. Lennard uttered an exclamation, and turned round.

"You naughty girl, you quite startled me," she cried.

Not so much as she had startled Eleanor, who could not repress a cry of surprise at the sight of her face. It was a very pretty face, very young-looking, though Mrs. Major Lennard was nearly forty years of age. A fair childish face, with pink cheeks, turquoise-blue eyes, and the palest, softest bands of flaxen hair; rather an insipid, German kind of beauty, perhaps, but very perfect of its kind.

But that which had startled Eleanor was not the babyish, delicate prettiness of the face, but the strong resemblance which it bore to Laura Mason. It was the same face after twenty years, not of wear and tear, but of very careful preservation. This lady, in appearance and manner, was exactly what Laura must most surely become if she lived to be seven-and-thirty years of age.

CHAPTER XIII.

GOING BACK TO PARIS.

ELEANOR was so completely bewildered by this extraordinary likeness that she remained for some moments staring at Mrs. Major Lennard in silent surprise.

"Goodness me, my dear!" exclaimed the lady, "how astonished you look! I hope I'm not a GUY. Frederick—that's Major Lennard, you know—never liked this bonnet, and really I'm beginning quite to dislike it myself. I do think its *pokey*. But never mind that, my dear Miss—Villars, I think Miss Barkham said,—a very nice person, Miss Barkham, isn't she? but rather prim. I've got all sorts of business to settle between this and eight o'clock, for Fred *will* travel by the night mail, because he sleeps all the way, and of course that makes the journey shorter—in consequence of which I've never seen Dover, except in the dark, and I always think of it with the lamps

lighted and the pier slippery, and everybody hurrying and pushing, like a place in a dream. But the first question, my dear, that we've got to settle, is whether you like me, and think you could make a sister of me?"

This question, asked very eagerly, was really too much for poor Eleanor.

"Oh please don't look so surprised," Mrs. Lennard exclaimed, entreatingly; "you make me fancy I'm a guy, and you see there's really no time to be lost, and we must decide immediately, if you please. I was here all yesterday afternoon, and I saw legions of ladies, but there wasn't one that I could take a fancy to, and my only motive for engaging a companion is to have somebody that I shall like very much, and always feel at home with, and I want some one who can play the piano and be agreeable and lively, and I'm sure you're the very person, dear, and if you only think you can like me as well as I'm sure I shall like you, we can settle the business at once."

"But you know that I can give you no references," Eleanor said, hesitatingly.

"Of course I do," answered Mrs. Lennard. "Miss Barkham told me all about it. As *if* I thought you'd committed a murder, or done some-

thing horrid, just because you can't pounce upon half-a-dozen people ready to declare you're an uncanonised saint all in a moment. I like your looks, my dear, and when I like people's looks at first sight, I generally like *them* afterwards. And you play magnificently, I only wish I could; and I used to play the overture to 'Semiramide' before I was married, but as Frederick doesn't like overtures, and as we've been scampering about the world ever since, in the cabins of ships, and in tents, and all sorts of places where you couldn't have pianos unless you had them made on purpose, without legs, I've gone backwards in my music till I can't play so much as a polka, without skipping the difficult parts."

Mrs. Lennard went on to say that the matter of salary was a question to be settled between Miss Villars and the major.

"I always leave money matters to Frederick," she said, "for though he can't add up the bills, he looks as if he could, and that's *some* check upon people. But you'll have to wait for your quarter's money now and then, I dare say, dear, because we're often a little behind-hand, you know, and if you don't mind that, it'll be all the better for you, as Fred's almost sure to give you a silk dress

when your quarter comes due and he can't pay you; that's what he calls a sop to Cerberus, and I'm sure the money he spends in keeping people 'sweet,' as he calls it, would keep us altogether if we paid ready money. Now, is it a settled thing, Miss Villars? Will you accept the situation?"

Eleanor assented without hesitation. She heard very little of Mrs. Lennard's good-natured babble. Her whole mind was absorbed by the sense of her defeat, and by the feeling that she had no further chance of victory over Launcelot Darrell. She despaired, but she did not submit. She was only desperate and reckless, ready to go anywhere, and finish the useless remainder of her existence anyhow. She was not prepared to begin a new life upon a new plan, casting the old scheme of her life behind her, as a mistake and a delusion. She was not able to do this yet.

While Mrs. Lennard was gathering together a lot of frivolous-looking little whity-brown paper parcels that seemed to bear a strong family resemblance to herself, Miss Barkham came into the room to ascertain the result of the interview between the two ladies. Mrs. Lennard expressed herself in the most rapturous manner about

Eleanor, paid some small fee for the benefit of the institution, and departed, carrying her parcels and taking Eleanor with her.

She allowed her companion to assist her with the parcels, after a little good-natured contention, and at the nearest corner summoned a cab which was dawdling lazily along.

"Of course the man will overcharge us," Mrs. Lennard said, "but we must be prepared for that, and really I'd rather be overcharged than have a row, as we generally have when I'm with the major, and summonses and counter-summonses, and all sorts of disagreeables; not that I mind that half so much as foreign cabmen, who get excited, and dance upon the pavement and make wild noises if you don't satisfy them; and I'm sure I don't know what *would* satisfy foreign cabmen."

Mrs. Lennard took out her watch, which was a pretty little Geneva toy with an enamelled back, ornamented with the holes that had once held diamonds. An anxious and intensely studious expression came over Mrs. Lennard's face as she looked at this watch, which was overweighted by a heap of incomprehensible charms, amongst which chaotic mass of golden frivolity, a skeleton,

a watering-pot, a coffin, and a Dutch oven were distinguishable.

"It's half-past five by *me*," Mrs. Lennard said, after a profound contemplation of the Geneva, "so I should think it must be *about* a quarter to three."

Eleanor took out her own watch and settled the question. It was only half-past two.

"Then I've gained another quarter of an hour," exclaimed Mrs. Lennard; "that's the worst of pretty watches, they always will go too much, or else stop altogether. Freddy bought me my watch, and he gave me my choice as to whether he should spend the money in purple enamel and diamonds, or works, and I chose the purple enamel. But then, of course I didn't know the diamonds would drop out directly," Mrs. Lennard added, thoughtfully.

She drove about to half-a-dozen shops, and collected more whity-brown paper parcels, a band-box, a bird-cage, a new carpet-bag, a dog's collar, a packet of tea, and other incongruous merchandize, and then ordered the man to drive to the Great Northern Hotel.

"We're staying at the Great Northern, my dear," she said, after giving this order. "We

very often stay at hotels, for Frederick thinks it's cheaper to pay fifteen shillings a day for your rooms than to have a house, and servants' wages, and coals and candles, and lard, and blacklead, and hearthstone, and all those little things that run away with so much money. And I should like the Great Northern very much if the corridors weren't so long and the waiters so stern. I always think waiters at grand hotels *are* stern. They seem to look at one as if they knew one was thinking of the bill, and trying to calculate whether it would be under ten pounds. But, oh, good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Lennard, suddenly, "what a selfish creature I am, I've quite forgotten all this time that of course you'll want to go home to your mamma and papa, and tell them where you're going, and get your boxes packed, and all that."

Eleanor shook her head with a sad smile.

"I have no mother or father to consult," she said; "I am an orphan."

"Are you?" cried Mrs. Lennard; "then it must have been our destiny to meet, for I am an orphan, too. Ma died while I was a baby, and poor pa died soon after my marriage. He was disappointed in my marriage, poor dear old thing,

though I'm glad to think it wasn't that, but gout in the stomach, that killed him. But you'll want to see your friends, Miss Villars, won't you, before you leave London?"

"No," Eleanor answered; "I shall write to the only friends I have. I don't want to see any one; I don't want any one to know where I am going. I left my portmanteau at an hotel in Norfolk Street, and I shall be glad if you will let me call for it."

Mrs. Lennard gave the necessary order; the cabman drove to the hotel where Eleanor had left her portmanteau, and thence to the Great Northern, where Mrs. Lennard conducted her new companion to a very handsome apartment on the ground-floor, opening into a palatial bed-chamber, whose splendour was a good deal impaired by the circumstances that the stately Arabian bed, the massive easy-chairs, the sofa, the dressing-table, and even the washhand-stand were loaded with divers articles of male and female attire, which seemed to have been flung here and there by some harmless maniac disporting himself about the room.

In the very centre of all this disorder, upon a great black leather military travelling-case, sat a

big broad-chested man of about forty, with good-natured, sun-burnt face, a very fierce auburn moustache, and a thick stubble of crisp, wavy, auburn hair, cut close to his head, in the development of which a disciple of Mr. George Coombe would have scarcely discovered the organs that make a man either a general or a philosopher. This sun-burnt, good-humoured looking gentleman had taken off his coat for the better accomplishment of his herculean labours; and, with his arms folded and his legs crossed, with an embroidered slipper balanced upon the extremity of his toes, and a meerschaum pipe in his mouth, he sat resting himself, after taking the initiatory step of dragging everything out of the drawers and wardrobe.

"Oh, you *lazy* Freddy!" cried Mrs. Lennard, looking in at her lord and master with a reproachful countenance, "is that all you've done?"

"Where's the blue barège with the flounces to go?" roared the major in the voice of an amiable Stentor. "I couldn't do anything till I knew that, and I've been waiting for you to come home. Have you got a companion?"

"Hush! yes! she's in the next room; such a dear, and awfully pretty. If you stare at her

much I shall be jealous, Freddy, for you know you *are* a starer, though you never will confess it. *I've* seen you, in Regent Street, when you've thought I've been looking at the bonnets," added the lady, reproachfully.

Upon this the major got up, and, lifting his wife in his arms, gave her such a hug as a well-disposed bear might have bestowed upon the partner of his den. Major Lennard was about six feet one and a half in the embroidered slippers, and was as strong as a gladiator in good training.

"Come and be introduced to her," exclaimed Mrs. Lennard; and she led her husband, in his shirt-sleeves, nothing abashed, into the adjoining sitting-room.

The major's conversational powers were not very startling. He made a few remarks about the weather, which were more courteous than original. He asked Eleanor if she was hungry, if she would have luncheon, or wait for a six o'clock dinner, and if she was a good sailor. Then, coming suddenly to a stand still, he demanded soda water and brandy.

It was the habit of this amiable man to require this beverage on every possible occasion. He was by no means a drunkard, though he was one of

those good-natured noisy creatures who can never be convivial without getting tipsy; but his existence was one perpetual absorption of soda water and brandy. Why he drank this mixture, which the uninitiated are apt to consider insipid, was a mystery only to be explained by himself. He could not have been perpetually thirsty; and I am inclined to think that this soda water and brandy was the desperate resource of a feeble intellect craving some employment, rather than a physical want.

The major and his wife retired to the bedroom and began their packing. When matters grew very desperate Eleanor was summoned as a forlorn hope, and did her best to reduce the chaos into something like order. This process occupied the time until six o'clock, when the major put on his coat and sat down to dinner.

But even during dinner the packing business was not altogether suspended, for every now and then, when there was a little pause in the banquet, Mrs. Lennard jumped up from the table, and ran into the next room with her workbox, or her desk, or something from the mantelpiece or one of the sofa-tables—sometimes a book, sometimes a paper-knife, a thimble, a pair of scissors, a

pen-wiper, or a packet of envelopes,—and then scampered back to her place before the waiter re-entered the room, and tried to look as if she hadn't left her seat. The major meanwhile worked steadily on with his knife and fork, only looking up from his plate to attend to the wants of Eleanor and his wife.

At last everything was ready. The addresses were fastened to the boxes and portmanteaus. A bewildering canary bird—which rejoiced in every kind of noise and confusion, and had been excruciatingly loud and shrill all the afternoon—was inducted into the new brass cage which Mrs. Lennard had bought for it. A sharp little black-and-tan terrier, the property of the major, was invested in the new collar, and securely padlocked; Eleanor and Mrs. Lennard put on their shawls and bonnets; the major made himself gigantic by the addition of a rough great-coat, a Scotch plaid, and half-a-dozen yards of woollen comforter to his normal bulk; the bill was paid at the very last moment, while the luggage was being piled upon the top of an extra cab; and Major Lennard and his companions departed at a rattling pace for the London Bridge terminus. There was just time enough for the major to get the tickets and choose

a comfortable carriage, before the train started. Away they flew through the darkness of the bleak March night, and Eleanor felt that every throb of the shrieking engine made the step that she had taken more irrevocable.

"There was not a word in Gilbert's letter that expressed sorrow at parting from me," she thought. "I had worn out his love, I suppose."

It was eleven o'clock when they got to Dover. Major Lennard slept all the way, with the lappets of his travelling cap, which was a sort of woollen caricature of a Knight Templar's helmet, drawn closely over his ears. Mrs. Lennard, who was very wide awake all the time, sat opposite to her husband, with the canary bird on her lap. He had grown quiet at last, and had retired from the world under a tent of green-baize. The bird's mistress made up for his silence by talking incessantly throughout the journey; but it only seemed to Eleanor as if she had a second Laura for her companion, and the succession of her own sad thoughts was scarcely broken by Mrs. Lennard's conversation.

They arrived in Paris the next morning in time for breakfast at the great Hôtel du Palais, a monstrous building, newly erected, and rich in

the glitter of gilding and the glow of colour. Here the major took up his abode, after deliberately expounding to his wife and Eleanor the theory that the best and most expensive hotels are always the cheapest—in the end. This moral had been the rule of the major's life, and had very often brought him alarmingly near the awful abysses of insolvency.

The gorgeous apartments in which Eleanor found herself were very unlike the low-ceilinged little sitting-room in the Rue de l'Archevêque; but her mind went back to that sad time, nevertheless. She spent the morning in the agreeable employment of unpacking Mrs. Lennard's wardrobe, while the major and his wife sailed out of the great hotel to sun themselves in the Rue Rivoli and on the Boulevards, and to wind up with a drive in the Bois, and a little dinner at Vèfour's. When she had completed this most wearisome task, and had arranged all the scraps of lace and ribbons, the gloves and collars, and feminine furbelows, in a buhl chest of drawers and a gorgeous ebony and gold wardrobe, Mrs. Monckton put on her bonnet and shawl, and went out into the busy street.

The tears rushed up to her eyes as she looked

at the bright vista before her, and heard the roll of the drum, and the tramp of soldiers' feet in the courts of the Louvre. Yes, there was the street along which she had walked by her father's side on the last day of his blighted life. Her hands clenched themselves involuntarily as she remembered that day; and that other bitter day of anguish in which she had knelt upon the ground and sworn to be revenged upon George Vane's enemy.

How had she kept her oath? She smiled bitterly as she thought of the four years that had passed since then, and the strange chance that had flung Launcelot Darrell in her way.

"I went away from this place while he was here," she thought. "I come back to it now that he is in England. Is it my destiny, I wonder, always to fail in everything I attempt?"

She went to the Rue de l'Archevêque. Nothing was changed. The same butcher was busy in the shop; the same faded curtains of flowered damask hung behind the windows.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARGARET LENNARD'S DELINQUENCIES.

Mrs. Major Lennard was very kind to Eleanor, and if kindness and friendliness on the part of her employers could have made Mrs. Monckton comfortable, she might have been entirely so in her new position.

But comfort was a noun substantive whose very meaning must, I think, have been utterly incomprehensible to Major and Mrs. Lennard. They had married very young, had started in life all wrong, and had remained in a perpetual state of muddle, both mental and physical, ever since. They were like two children who had played at being grown-up people for twenty years or so, and who were as entirely childish in their play now as they had been at the very beginning. To live with them was to exist in an atmosphere of bewilderment and confusion; to have any dealings whatever with them was to plunge at once

into a chaos of disorder, out of which the clearest intellect could scarcely emerge without having suffered complete disorganisation. The greatest misfortune of these two people was the likeness they bore to each other. Had Major Lennard been a man of vigorous intellect and strong will, or had he been merely possessed of the average allowance of common sense, he might have ruled his wife, and introduced some element of order into his existence. On the other hand, if Mrs. Lennard had been a sensible woman she would no doubt have henpecked her husband, and would have rescued the good-natured soldier from a hundred follies, by a well-timed frown, or a sharp matronly nudge, as the occasion might demand.

But they were both alike. They were two overgrown children of forty years of age; and they looked upon the world as a great play-room, whose inhabitants had no better occupation than to find amusement, and shirk the schoolmaster. They were generous and kind-hearted to a degree that, in the opinion of their wiser acquaintance, bordered upon foolishness. They were imposed upon on every side, and had been imposed upon during twenty years, without acquiring any moral wealth in the way of wisdom, from their very

costly experience. The major had within the last twelve months left the army on half-pay, on the death of a maiden aunt, who had left him eight hundred a year. Up to the date of receiving this welcome legacy, the soldier and his wife had been compelled to exist upon Major Lennard's pay, eked out by the help of stray benefactions which he received from time to time from his rich relatives. The family to which the ponderous officer belonged was very numerous and aristocratic, owning as its chief a marquis, who was uncle to the major.

So the two big children had decided upon enjoying themselves very much for the rest of their days, and as a commencement of this new life of idleness and enjoyment, Major Lennard had brought his wife to Paris, whence they were to go to Baden-Baden, to meet some of the major's aristocratic cousins.

"He might come in for the title himself, my dear," Mrs. Lennard told Eleanor, "if seventeen of his first cousins, and first cousins once removed, would die. But, as I told poor papa, when he grumbled at my marrying so badly, you can't expect seventeen cousins to go off all in a minute, just to oblige us by making Freddy a marquis."

Perhaps nothing could have been happier for Eleanor than this life of confusion, this scrambling and unsettled existence, in which the mind was kept in a tumult by trifling cares and agitations; for in this perpetual disorganisation of her intellect, the lonely girl had no time to think of her own troubles, or of the isolated position which she had chosen for herself. It was only at night, when she went to bed, in a small apartment very high up in the Hôtel du Palais, and about a quarter of an hour's walk from the chamber of the major and his wife, that she had time to think of Launcelot Darrell's triumph and her husband's unjust suspicions; and even then she could rarely brood very long upon her troubles, for she was generally exhausted alike in mind and body by the confusion and excitement of the day, and more likely to fall asleep and dream of her sorrows than to lie awake and think of them.

Those dreams were more troublesome to her than all the bewilderment of the day, for in them she was perpetually renewing the old struggle with Launcelot Darrell, perpetually upon the eve of victory, but never quite victorious.

The major lingered in Paris much longer than he had intended, for the big children found the

city of boulevards a most delightful playground, and frittered away a great deal of money upon expensive dinners at renowned restaurants, ices, opera tickets, new bonnets, Piver's gloves, Lubin's perfumes, and coach hire.

They stopped at the Hôtel du Palais, still acting on the major's theory, that the most expensive hotels are the cheapest—in the end. They dined occasionally at the table-d'hôte, with two or three hundred companions, and wasted a good deal of time in the great saloons, playing at bagatelle, peering into stereoscopes, turning over the daily papers, reading stray paragraphs here and there, or poring over a chapter of a romance in the *feuilleton*, until brought to a standstill by a disheartening abundance of difficult words.

After breakfast, the major left his wife and her companion, either to loll in the reading-room, to stroll about the great stone quadrangle, smoking cigars, and drinking occasional brandy and soda, or to read the English papers at Galignani's, or to wait for the post, or to meet a British acquaintance at Hill's café, or to stare at the raw young soldiers exercising in the courtyards of the Louvre, or the copper-faced Zouaves who had done such wonderful work in the Crimea; or perhaps to

stumble across some hoary-headed veteran who had fought under Napoleon the First, to make friendly speeches to him in bad French, with every verb in a bewilderingly impossible tense, and to treat him to little glasses of pale cognac.

Then Mrs. Lennard brought out her frame and her colour-box, and her velvets and brushes, and all the rest of her implements, and plunged at once into the delightful pursuit of painting upon velvet—an accomplishment which this lady had only newly acquired in six lessons for a guinea, during her last brief sojourn in London.

"The young person who taught me called herself Madame Ascanio de Brindisi—but, oh! Miss Villars, if ever there was a Cockney in this world, I think she was one—and she said in her advertisement, that anybody could earn five pounds a-week easily at this elegant and delightful occupation; but I'm sure I don't know how *I* should ever earn five pounds a week, Miss Villars, for I've been nearly a month at this one sofa cushion, and it has cost five-and-thirty shillings already, and isn't finished yet, and the major doesn't like to see me work, and I'm obliged to do it while he's out; just as if it was a crime to paint upon velvet. If you *would* mend those gloves, dear,

that are split across the thumb—and really Piver's gloves at four francs, five-and-twenty what's its names? oughtn't to do so, though the major says it's my own fault, because I will buy six-and-a-quarters—I should be *so* much obliged," Mrs. Lennard added, entreatingly, as she seated herself at her work in one of the long windows. "I shall get on splendidly," she exclaimed, "if the Emperor doesn't go for a drive; but if he does, I must leave off my work and look at him—he's such a dear!"

Eleanor was very willing to make herself what the advertisements call "generally useful," to the lady who had engaged her. She was a very high-spirited girl, we know, quick to resent any insult, sensitive and proud; but she had no false pride. She felt no shame in doing what she had undertaken to do; and if, for her own convenience, she had taken the situation of a kitchen-maid, she would have performed the duties of that situation to the best of her ability. So she mended Mrs. Lennard's gloves, and darned that lady's delicate lace collars, and tried to infuse something like order into her toilette, and removed the damp ends of cigars, which it was the major's habit to leave about upon every available piece of fur-

niture, and made herself altogether so useful that Mrs. Lennard declared that she would henceforward be unable to live without her.

"But I know how it will be, you nasty provoking thing!" the major's wife exclaimed; "you'll go on in this way, and you'll make us fond of you, and just as we begin to doat upon you, you'll go and get married and leave us, and then I shall have to get another old frump like Miss Pallister, who lived with me before you, and who never would do anything for me scarcely, but was always talking about belonging to a good family, and not being used to a life of dependence. I'm sure I used to wish she had belonged to a bad family. But I know it'll be so, just as we're most comfortable with you, you'll go and marry some horrid creature."

Eleanor blushed crimson as she shook her head.

"I don't think that's very likely," she said.

"Ah! you say that," Mrs. Lennard answered, doubtfully, "but you can't convince me quite so easily. I know you'll go and marry; but you don't know the troubles you may bring upon yourself if you marry young—as I did," added the lady, dropping her brush upon her work, and breathing a profound sigh.

"Troubles, my dear Mrs. Lennard!" cried Eleanor. "Why it seems to me as if you never could have had any sorrow in your life."

"'Seems, Hamlet!'" exclaimed Mrs. Lennard, casting up her eyes tragically; "'nay, it is; *I* know not seems,' as the Queen says to Hamlet—or perhaps it's Hamlet says so to the Queen, but that doesn't matter. Oh, Miss Villars! my life might have been very happy, perhaps, but for the blighting influence of my own crime; a crime that I can never atone for—*nev-arr!*"

Eleanor would have been quite alarmed by this speech, but for the tone of enjoyment with which Mrs. Lennard gave utterance to it. She had pushed aside her frame and huddled her brushes together upon the buhl table—there was nothing but buhl and ormolu, and velvet-pile and ebony, at the Hôtel du Palais, and an honest mahogany chair, a scrap of Kidderminster carpet, or a dimity curtain, would have been a relief to the over-strained intellect—and she sat with her hands clasped upon the edge of the table, and her light blue eyes fixed in a tragic rapture.

"Crime, Mrs. Lennard!" Eleanor repeated, in that tone of horrified surprise which was less prompted by actual terror, than by the feeling

that some exclamation of the kind was demanded of her.

"Yes, my dear, ker-rime! ker-rime! is not too harsh a word for the conduct of a woman who jilts the man that loves her on the very eve of the day appointed for the wedding, after a most elaborate trousseau has been prepared at *his* expense, to say nothing of heaps of gorgeous presents, and diamonds as plentiful as dirt—and elopes with another man. Nothing could be more dreadful than that, could it, Miss Villars?"

Eleanor felt that she was called upon to say that nothing *could* be more dreadful, and said so accordingly.

"Oh, don't despise me, then, or hate me, please Miss Villars," cried Mrs. Lennard; "I know you'll feel inclined to do so; but don't. I did it!—I did it, Miss Villars. But I'm not altogether such a wretch as I may seem to you. It was chiefly for my poor pa's sake; it was, indeed."

Eleanor was quite at a loss to know how Mrs. Lennard's bad conduct to her affianced husband could have benefited that lady's father, and she said something to that effect.

"Why, you see, my dear, in order to explain

that, I must go back to the very beginning, which was when I was at school."

As Mrs. Lennard evidently derived very great enjoyment from this kind of conversation, Eleanor was much too good-natured to discourage it; so the painting upon velvet was abandoned, for that morning at least, and the major's wife gave a brief synopsis of her history for the benefit of Mrs. Monckton.

"You must know, my dear," Mrs. Lennard began, "my poor pa was a country gentleman; and he had once been very rich; or at least his family—and he belonged to a very old family, though not as aristocratic as the major's—had once been very rich; but somehow or other, through the extravagance of one and another, poor pa was dreadfully poor, and his estate, which was in Berkshire, was heavily—what's its name?—mortgaged."

Eleanor gave a slight start at the word "Berkshire," which did not escape Mrs. Lennard.

"You know Berkshire?" she said.

"Yes, some part of it."

"Well, my dear, as I said before, poor papa's estate was very heavily mortgaged, and he'd scarcely anything that he could call his own,

except the rambling old country-house in which I was born; and beyond that he was awfully in debt, and in constant dread of his creditors sending him to prison, where he might have finished his days, for there wasn't the least possibility of his ever paying his debts by anything short of a miracle. Now of course all this was very sad. However I was too young to know much about it, and papa sent me to a fashionable school at Bath where his sisters had gone when they were young, and where he knew he could get credit for my education to be finished."

Eleanor, hard at work at the split gloves, listened rather indifferently to this story at first; but little by little she began to be interested in it, until at last she let her hands drop into her lap, and left off working, in order the better to attend to Mrs. Lennard's discourse.

"Well, Miss Villars, it was at that school that I met the ruling star of my fate—that is to say, the major, who was then dreadfully young, without even the least pretence of whiskers, and always sitting in a pastrycook's shop in the fashionable street, eating strawberry ices. He had only just got his commission, and he was quartered at Bath with his regiment, and his

sister Louisa was my schoolfellow at Miss Florathorne's, and he called one morning to see her, and I happened that very morning to be practising in the drawing-room, the consequence of which was that we met, and from that hour our destinies were sealed.

"I won't dwell upon our meetings, which Louisa managed for us, and which were generally dreadfully inconvenient, for Fred used to clamber up the garden wall by the toes of his boots—and he has told me since that the brickwork used to scratch off all the varnish, which of course made it dreadfully expensive—but what will not love endure?—and hook himself on as it were; and it was in that position, with nothing of him visible below his chin, that he made me a most solemn offer of his hand and heart. I was young and foolish, Miss Villars, and I accepted him, without one thought of my poor papa, who was the most indulgent of parents, and who had always let me do everything I liked, and indeed owed upwards of fifty pounds, at a toyshop in Windsor, for dolls and things that he bought me before I was grown up.

"Well, from that hour, Frederick and I were engaged, and he dropped a turquoise ring in

among the bushes at the bottom of the garden the next morning, and Louisa and I had upwards of an hour's work to find it. We were engaged! But we were not long allowed to bask in the sunshine of requited affection, for a fortnight after this Frederick's regiment was ordered out to Malta, and I was wretched. I will pass over my wretchedness, which might not be interesting to you, Miss Villars, and I will only say that, night after night, my pillow was wet with tears, and that, but for Louisa's sympathy, I should have broken my heart. Frederick and I corresponded regularly under cover of Louisa, and that was my only comfort.

"By-and-by, however, the time for my leaving school came—partly because I was seventeen years of age, and partly because papa couldn't settle Miss Florathorne's bills—and I went home to the old rambling house in Berkshire. Here I found everything at sixes and sevens, and poor papa in dreadfully low spirits. His creditors were all getting horribly impatient, he had all sorts of writs, and attachments, and judgments, and contempt of courts, and horrors of that kind, out against him; and if they could have put him into two prisons at once, I think they would

have done it, for some of them wanted him in Whitecross Street, and others wanted him in the Queen's Bench, and it was altogether dreadful.

"Well, papa's only friend of late years had been a very learned gentleman, belonging to a grand legal firm in the city, who had managed all his business matters for him. Now this gentleman had lately died, and his only son, who had succeeded to a very large fortune upon his father's death, was staying with my poor papa when I came home from school.

"I hope you won't think me conceited, Miss Villars, but in order to make my story intelligible, I'm *obliged* to say that at that time I was considered a very pretty girl. I had been the belle of the school at Miss Florathorne's, and when I went back to Berkshire and mixed in society, people made a tremendous fuss about me. Of course you know, my dear, troubles about money matters, and a wandering life, and French dinners, which are too much for a weak digestion, have made a very great difference in me, and I'm not a bit like what I was then. Well, the young lawyer who was staying with papa—I shall not tell you his name, because I consider it very dis-

honourable to tell the name of a person you've jilted, even to a stranger—was very attentive. However, I took no notice of that—though he was very handsome and elegant-looking, and awfully clever—for my heart was true to Frederick, from whom I received the most heart-rending letters under cover to Louisa, declaring that, what with the mosquitoes and what with the separation from me, and owing debts of honour to his brother officers, and not clearly seeing his way to pay them, he was often on the verge of committing suicide.

"I had not told papa of my engagement, you must know, my dear, because I felt sure he'd grumble about my engaging myself to a penniless ensign; though Fred might have been a marquis, for at that time there were only eleven cousins between him and the title. So one day papa took me out for a drive with him, while Mr. ——while the young lawyer was out shooting; and he told me that he was sure, from several things the young lawyer had let drop, that he was desperately in love with me, and that it would be his salvation—pa's—if I would marry him, for he was sure that in that case the young man, who was very generous and noble-

minded, would pay his debts—pa's—and then he could go on the continent and end his days in peace.

"Well, my dear Miss Villars, the scene between us was actually heartrending. I told pa that I loved another—I dared not say that I was actually engaged to poor dear Frederick—and pa entreated me to sacrifice what he called a foolish school-girl's fancy, and to give some encouragement to a noble-hearted young man, who would no doubt get him out of the most abominable trouble, and would make me an excellent husband."

"And you consented?"

"Yes, my dear, after a great deal of persuasion, and after shedding actual oceans of tears, and in compliance with papa's entreaties, I began to give the young lawyer—I'm obliged to call him the *young* lawyer, because one is so apt to associate lawyers with grey hair, and grumpiness, and blue bags—a little encouragement, and in about a week's time he made me an offer, and I accepted it, though my heart was still true to Frederick, and I was still corresponding with him under cover of Louisa."

Eleanor looked very grave at this part of the

story, and Mrs. Lennard interpreted her companion's serious face as a mute reproach.

"Yes, I know it was very wrong," she exclaimed; "but then, what in goodness' name was I to do, driven to distraction upon one side by pa, driven to distraction upon the other side by Fred, who vowed that he would blow out his brains if I didn't write to him by every mail?

"Well, my dear, the young lawyer, whom I shall call in future my affianced husband, for short, behaved most nobly. In the first place he bought pa's estate, not that he wanted it, but because pa wanted the money, and then he lent pa enough money, over and above the price of the estate, to settle with all his creditors, and to buy an annuity, upon which he could live very comfortably abroad. Of course this was very generous of him, and he made quite light of it, declaring that my love would have repaid him for much greater sacrifices. You know he thought I loved him, and I really did try to love him, and to throw over poor Frederick, for papa's sake; but the more I tried to throw Frederick over, and the more distant and cold I made my letters, the more heartrending he became, reminding me of the vows I had uttered in the garden at Bath, and

declaring that if I jilted him, his blood should be upon my head. So, what with one thing and another, my life was a burden.

"It took papa some time to settle all his debts, even with the assistance of my affianced husband, but at last everything was arranged, and we started for a continental tour. My affianced husband accompanied us, and the marriage was arranged to take place at Lausanne. I need not say that I was very unhappy all this time; and I felt that I was a very wicked creature, for I was deceiving one of the best of men. Perhaps the worst of all was, that my affianced husband had such perfect confidence in me, that I scarcely think anything I could have said or done—short of what I did at the very last—could have shaken his faith. He talked sometimes of my youth, and my childishness, and my simplicity, until I used to feel a perfect LUCRETIA BORGIA. Ah, Miss Villars, it was dreadful, and I often felt inclined to throw myself at his feet and tell him all about Frederick; but the thought of my poor papa, and the recollection of the money for the estate, which could not be paid back again, sealed my lips, and I went on day after day deceiving the best of men. You see, I'd gone too far to recede, and

oh, my dear, that is the awful penalty one always pays for one's wickedness—if you begin by deceiving any one, you're obliged to go on, and on, and on, from one deception to another, until you feel the basest creature in the world.

"At least that's how I felt when all the lovely dresses, and jewels, and things that my affianced husband had ordered arrived from Paris. If I could have walked upon gold, Miss Villars, I do think that foolish man—for he was quite foolish about me, though in a general way he was so very clever—would have thought the purest bullion only fit for paving stones under my feet. The silks and satins—satin wasn't *outré* then, you know—would have stood alone if one had wanted them to do so; the lace—well, I won't dwell upon that, because I daresay you think already that I shall never have done talking, and are getting dreadfully tired of this long story."

"No, Mrs. Lennard," Eleanor answered gravely, "I am very much interested in your story. You cannot tell how deeply it interests me."

The major's wife was only too glad to receive permission to run on. She was one of those people who are never happier than when reciting

their own memoirs, or relating remarkable passages in the history of their lives.

"The very eve of the wedding-day had arrived," resumed Mrs. Lennard in a very solemn, and, indeed, almost awful voice, "when the unlooked-for crisis of my destiny came upon me like a thunderbolt. Pa and my affianced husband had gone out together, and I was alone in one of the apartments which we occupied at Lausanne. It was about an hour before dinner, and I was dressed in one of the silks that had come from Paris, and I was tolerably resigned to my fate, and determined to do my best to make my affianced husband happy, and to prove my gratitude for his goodness to my father. Imagine my horror, then, when I was told that a lady wished to see me—an English lady—and before I could decide whether I was at home or not, in rushed Louisa Lennard, very dusty and tumbled, for she had only just arrived, and of course there was no railway to Lausanne from anywhere, at that time.

"Well, my dear Miss Villars, it seems that Frederick's silence, which I had taken for resignation, was quite the reverse. Louisa had heard of my intended marriage, and had written about

it to her brother, and her brother had gone nearly mad, and, being on the eve of obtaining leave of absence on account of his bad health—the climate had knocked him up,—contrived to get away from Malta immediately. He and his sister had managed to pursuade their rich maiden aunt, who was very fond of Frederick, and who left him all her money the other day, to take them both to Switzerland, and there they were, with the rich maiden aunt, who was very much knocked up by the journey, and who had not the least shadow of a suspicion that she had been made a cat's-paw.

"Well, Miss Villars, anybody — even the hardest-hearted of creatures—would have been touched by such devotion as this, and for the moment I forgot all about my affianced husband's generosity, and I gave that enthusiastic Louisa, who really was the moving spirit of everything, a solemn promise that I would see Frederick that night, if only for ten minutes. Of course I didn't tell her that the next day was appointed for my wedding, because I was too much afraid of her anger, as she was devotedly attached to her brother, and had heard my solemn vows in the garden at Bath; but the

people at the hotel told her all about it, in their nasty gossiping way: the consequence of which was, that when I met Fred in the porch of the cathedral, while papa and my affianced husband were taking their wine after dinner, his goings on were really awful.

"I can never describe that scene. When I look back at it, it seems like a dream—all hurry, and noise, and confusion. Frederick declared that he had come all the way from Malta to claim me as his bride, and called my affianced husband a baron all covered with jewels and gold, from the ballad of 'Alonzo the Brave,' which he had been in the habit of reciting at school. And, poor dear fellow, now that I saw him again, my heart, which had always been true to him, seemed more true to him than ever; and what with Louisa, who was very strong-minded, going on at me, and calling me mercenary and faithless and deceitful, and what with Frederick going down upon his knees in that chilly porch, and getting up suddenly every time the person who showed the cathedral to strangers happened to look our way, I scarcely knew what I said or did, and Frederick extorted from me the promise that I would run away with him and Louisa

that very night, and be married to him as soon as ever we could find anybody that would marry us.

"I can never describe that dreadful night, Miss Villars; suffice it to say, that I ran away without a bit of luggage, and that Frederick, Louisa, and I, performed the most awful journey —almost all by diligence—and were nearly jolted to death between Lausanne and Paris, where Fred, by the help of some English friends, contrived to get the ceremony performed by a Protestant clergyman, at the house of the British Consul, but not without a great deal of difficulty and delay, during which I expected every day that my affianced husband would come tearing after me.

"He did nothing of the kind, however. I heard afterwards from papa that he didn't show the least disposition to pursue me, and he particularly requested that no attempt should be made to prevent my doing exactly as I pleased with regard to Fred. If he had pursued me, Miss Villars, I have no doubt I should have gone back and married him, for I am very weak, and it is my nature to do whatever people wish me to do. But all he did was to walk about

very quietly, looking as pale as a ghost for a day or two, and braving out all the ridicule that attached to him because of his bride's running away from him upon the eve of the wedding-day, and then he parted company with papa, and went away to Egypt, and went up the Nile, and did all sorts of outlandish things."

"And have you never seen him since?" Eleanor asked, anxiously.

"Yes, once," answered Mrs. Lennard, "and that's the most singular part of the story. About three years after my marriage I was in London, and Fred and I were very, very poor, for his aunt hadn't then forgiven him for making a cat's-paw of her at Lausanne, and he had no remittances from her, and nothing but his pay and an occasional present from Louisa, who married a rich city man soon after our elopement. I had had one baby, a little girl, who was then a year and a half old, and who was christened after Fred's rich aunt; and Fred's regiment was ordered out to India, and I was getting ready to join him at Southampton, and I was very unhappy at having to take my darling out there, for people said the climate would kill her. I was in lodgings in the neighbourhood of

Euston Square, and I was altogether very wretched, when one evening, at dusk, as I was sitting by the fire, with my little girl in my lap, who should walk into the room but the very man I had jilted.

"I gave a scream when I saw him, but he begged me not to be frightened of him; and then I asked him if he had forgiven me. He said he had tried to forgive me. He was very grave and quiet; but though I think he tried to be gentle, there was a sort of suppressed sternness in his manner which made me feel afraid of him. He had not very long returned from the East, he said, and he was very lonely and wretched. He had heard from my father that I was going to India, and that I had a little girl, whom I was obliged to take abroad with me for want of the means of providing her with a comfortable home in England. He proposed to me to adopt this little girl, and to bring her up as his own daughter, with my husband's consent.

"He promised to leave her very well off at his death, and to give her a fortune if he lived to see her married. He would be most likely, he said, to leave her all his money; but he made it a condition that neither I nor her

father should have any further claim upon her. We were to give her up altogether, and were to be satisfied with hearing of her from time to time, through him.

"'I am a lonely man, Mrs. Lennard,' he said; 'even my wealth is a burden to me. My life is purposeless and empty. I have no incentive to labour—nothing to love or to protect. Let me have your little girl; I shall be a better father to her than your husband can be.'

"At first I thought that I could never, never consent to such a thing; but little by little he won me over, in a grave, persuasive way, that convinced me in spite of myself, and I couldn't afford to engage a nurse to go out to Calcutta with me, and I'd advertised for an ayah who wanted to return, and who would go with me for the consideration of her passage-money, but there had been no answers to my advertisements; so at last I consented to write to Fred to ask him if he would agree to our parting with the pet. Fred wrote me the shortest of letters by return of post; 'Yes,' he said, 'the child would be an awful nuisance on shipboard, and it will be much better for her to stop in England.' I sent his letter to the lawyer, and the next day he brought a nurse,

a respectable elderly person, and fetched away my precious darling.

"You see, Miss Villars, neither Fred nor I had *realised* the idea that we were parting with her for ever; we only thought of the convenience of getting her a happy home in England for nothing, while we went to be broiled to death's door out in India. But, ah, when years and years passed by, and the two babies who were born in India died, I began to grieve dreadfully about my lost pet; and if I hadn't been what some people call frivolous, and if Fred and I hadn't suited each other so exactly, and been somehow or other always happy together in all our troubles, I think I should have broken my heart. But I tried to be resigned," concluded Mrs. Lennard, with a profound sigh, "and I hear *of* my pet once in six months or so, though I never hear from her, and indeed I doubt if she knows she's got such a thing as a mama in the universe—and I have her portrait, poor darling, and she's very like what I was twenty years ago."

"I know she is," Eleanor answered gravely.

"You know she is! You know her, then?"

"Yes, dear Mrs. Lennard. Very strange things happen in this world, and not the least strange is

the circumstance which has brought you and me together. I know your daughter intimately. Her name is Laura, is it not?"

"Yes, Laura Mason Lennard, after Fred's rich aunt, Laura Mason."

"And your maiden name was Margaret Ravenshaw."

"Good gracious me, yes!" cried Mrs. Lennard. "Why you seem to know everything about me."

"I know this much,—the man you jilted was Gilbert Monckton, of Tolldale Priory."

"Of course! Tolldale was poor papa's place till he sold it to Mr. Monckton. Oh, Miss Villars, if you know him, how you must despise me."

"I only wonder that you could—"

Eleanor stopped abruptly; the termination of her speech would not have been very complimentary to the good-tempered major. Mrs. Lennard understood that sudden pause.

"I know what you were going to say, Miss Villars. You were going to say you wondered how I could prefer Fred to Gilbert Monckton; and I'm not a bit offended. I know as well as you do that Mr. Monckton is very, VERY, VERY

superior to Frederick in intellect, and dignity, and elegance, and all manner of things. But then you see," added Mrs. Lennard, with a pleading smile, "Fred *suited me.*"

CHAPTER XV.

VERY LONELY.

ELEANOR had considerable difficulty in parrying Mrs. Leonard's questions as to how she had come to know Gilbert Monckton and his ward; and she was obliged to confess that she had been musical governess to Laura at Hazlewood.

"But I must beg you not to tell Mr. Monckton that I am with you, if you should happen to write to him," Eleanor said. "I have a very particular reason for wishing him to remain in perfect ignorance of my present home."

"To be sure, my dear," answered Mrs. Lennard, of course I won't tell him if you don't wish me to do so. And as to writing to him, I should no more think of doing so than of flying in the air, except just a civil note of a few lines, to thank him for sending me news of Laura. He only writes to me once in six months or so, to tell me how my lost darling is, and though I've

implored him again and again, he won't let me see her. 'She is still little more than a child,' he wrote in his last letter, 'and I dread the effect of your influence upon her. It is out of no revengeful feeling that I keep your daughter apart from you. When her character is formed and her principles fixed, you shall know her.' As if I was a wretch!" cried Mrs. Lennard, in conclusion, "and should contaminate my own daughter."

Eleanor smiled as she shook her head.

"Dear Mrs. Lennard," she said, "your daughter is perhaps better off in the care of such a man as Gilbert Monckton. She is as kind-hearted and good-tempered as yourself, but she is rather weak, and—"

"And I'm weak, too. Yes, I quite understand you, Miss Villars. It is my misfortune to be weak-minded. I can't say 'no' to people. The arguments of the person who talks to me last always seem so much stronger than those of the person who talked to me first. I take impressions quickly, and don't take them deeply. I was touched to the heart by Gilbert Monckton's kindness to my father, and I meant to marry him as I promised, and to be his true and obedient wife; and then when that poor silly Fred

came all the way to Lausanne, and went on so about being ill-used and deserted, and wanted to commit suicide, I thought it was my duty to run away with Fred. I haven't any opinions of my own, you see, and I'm always ready to be influenced by the opinions of other people."

Eleanor thought long and deeply over the story she had heard from Mrs. Lennard. This was the root of all Gilbert Monckton's suspicions. He had been deceived, most cruelly, most unexpectedly, by a beautiful, childish creature in whose innocence he had implicitly believed. He had been fooled and hoodwinked by a fair-haired angel whose candid azure eyes had seemed to beam upon him with all the brightness of truth. He had been deceived most egregiously, but he had not been deliberately betrayed; for up to the time of her treacherous desertion of her affianced lover, Margaret Ravenshaw had meant to be true to him. Unhappily Gilbert Monckton did not know this. It is difficult for the man who finds himself as cruelly jilted as he had been, not to believe that the false one has intended all along to turn traitor at the last. There had been no explanation between Margaret and the lawyer; and he was entirely ignorant of the manner of her

flight. He only knew that she had left him without a word to prepare him for the death-blow, without a line of regretful farewell to make his sorrow lighter to him. The frivolous shallow woman had been unable to fathom the depth of the strong man's love. Margaret Ravenshaw knew there was a very little of the divine in her own nature, and she had never expected to inspire the mighty affection of a grand and noble soul. She was able to understand the love of Frederick Lennard; which was demonstrated by noisy protestations, and disclosed itself in long schoolboy letters in which the young man's doubtful orthography was blistered by his tears. But she could not understand the intensity of feelings that did not make themselves visible in any stereotyped fashion.

Unluckily for the harmony of creation, wise men do not always fall in love wisely. The wisest and the best are apt to be bound captive by some external charm, which they think must be the outward evidence of an inward grace; and Gilbert Monckton had loved this frivolous, capricious girl as truly as if she had been the noblest and greatest of womankind. So the blow that had fallen upon him was a very heavy one; and its most fatal effect

was to transform a confiding nature into a suspicious one.

He argued as many men argue under the same circumstances. He had been deceived by one woman, *ergo,* all women were capable of deception. I don't suppose the "Stranger" placed very much confidence in the Countess, or had by any means too high an opinion of Charlotte; and the best of men are apt to feel very much after the manner of Mrs. Haller's husband.

It seemed very strange to Eleanor to be living with Gilbert Monckton's first love. It was almost as if some one had risen out of the grave; for she had looked upon that old story which she had heard hinted at by the Hazlewood gossips, as something so entirely belonging to the past, that the heroine of the romance must of necessity be dead.

And here she was, alive and merry, knowing no greater uneasiness than a vague dread of increasing plumpness, induced by French dinners. Here she was the very reverse of the image that Eleanor had conjured up in her mind in association with Gilbert's false love; a good-tempered, common-place, pretty, middle-aged woman. Mrs. Monckton felt a little pang of jealousy at the

thought that her husband had once loved this woman so dearly. Her husband! Had she still the right to call him by that name? Had he not severed the link between them of his own free will? Had he not outraged her honour, insulted her truth by his base and unfounded suspicions? Yes! he had done all this, and yet Eleanor loved him! She knew the strength of her love now that she was away from him, and might perhaps never see his face looking at her in kindness again. She knew it now that her scheme of vengeance against Launcelot Darrell had failed, and left a great blank in her mind. She thought of her husband seriously now for the first time, and she knew that she loved him.

"Richard was right," she thought again and again; "the purpose of my life was cruel and unwomanly. I had no right to marry Gilbert Monckton while my mind was full of angry thoughts. Richard was right. My poor father's rest would be no more peaceful if I had made Launcelot Darrell pay the penalty of his wickedness."

She did not abandon her idea of vengeance all at once; but little by little, by very slow degrees, her mind became reconciled to the idea that she had failed in her scheme of retribution, and that

there was nothing left her but to try and justify herself in the sight of the husband she loved.

She loved him; and the angry feelings which had prompted her to run away from Tolldale Priory, willingly abandoning all claim to his name and his protection, were beginning to give way now. Mrs. Lennard's story had thrown new light upon the past, and Eleanor made all kinds of excuses for her husband's conduct. It was his habit to bear all sorrows quietly. Who could tell what anguish he might have felt in the thought of his young wife's falsehood?

"He would not pursue Margaret Ravenshaw," Eleanor thought, "and he makes no attempt to find me. And yet he may love me as truly as he loved her. Surely if God refused to hear my prayers for revenge, He will grant me the power to justify myself."

She could only blindly hope for some unknown chance that might bring about her justification; and that chance would perhaps never come. She was very unhappy when she thought of this; and it was only the perpetual confusion in which Major Lennard and his wife contrived to keep everybody belonging to them, that saved her from suffering very cruelly.

All this time she was quite ignorant of the appearance of an advertisement which had been repeated at the top of the second column of the "Times" supplement every day for nearly a month, and about which idle people hazarded all manner of conjectures—

ELEANOR, come back. I was rash and cruel. I will trust you. G. M.

Major Lennard was in the habit of seeing the "Times" every day at Galignani's; but, as he was not a very acute observer or original thinker, he took no notice of the repetition of this advertisement beyond an occasional "By Jove! Haw! that poor dayv'l's still advertising for El'ner!" nor did he ever make any allusion to the circumstance in his domestic circle.

So Eleanor hugged her sorrows secretly in the gayest city of the world, while Gilbert Monckton was hurrying hither and thither, and breaking his heart about his lost wife.

I think that pitying angels must sometimes weep over the useless torments, the unnecessary anguish, which foolish mortals inflict upon themselves.

CHAPTER XVI.

VICTOR BOURDON GOES OVER TO THE ENEMY.

Major and Mrs. Lennard and Eleanor Monckton had stayed for nearly two months at the Hôtel du Palais. April was fast melting into May, and the atmosphere in the City of Boulevards was very different to the air of an English spring. Miniature strawberries were exposed in the windows of the cheap restaurants in the Palais Royal, side by side with monstrous asparagus, and green peas from Algeria; until the mind of the insular-bred stranger grew confused as to the succession of the months, and was beguiled into thinking that May must be omitted in the French almanack, and that capricious April skipped away in a farewell shower to give place at once to glowing June.

It was difficult for a thorough-bred Briton to believe that the Fête of the First Napoleon had not yet come to set the fountains playing at

Versailles: for the asphalte on the Boulevards was unpleasantly warm under one's boots; airily-attired ladies were lounging upon the chairs in the gardens of the Tuileries; only the most fragile and vaporous bonnets were to be seen in the Bois de Boulogne; vanille and strawberry ices were in constant demand at Tortoni's; idle Parisians spent the dusky spring evenings seated outside the lighted cafés, drinking iced lemonade; and a hundred other signs and tokens bore witness that the summer had come.

Upon one of these very warm April days, Major Lennard insisted upon taking his wife and her companion to dine at a restaurant not very far from the Bourse; where the pastorally-inclined epicure could take his dinner in a garden, a pleasant quadrangle, festooned with gay blossoms, and musical with the ripple of a fountain. Eleanor did not often accompany the major and his wife in their pleasure excursions, the culminating attraction of which was generally a dinner; but this time Major Lennard insisted upon her joining them.

"It's the last dinner I shall give Meg in Paris," he said; "for we must start for Brussels on Saturday, and I mean it to be a good one."

Eleanor submitted, for her new friends had been very kind to her, and she had no motive for opposing their wishes. It was much better for her to be with them in any scene of gaiety, however hollow and false that gaiety might be, than alone in the splendid saloon at the Hôtel du Palais, brooding over her troubles in the dusky twilight, and thinking of the horrible night on which she had watched for her father's coming in the Rue de l'Archevêque.

The restaurant near the Place de la Bourse was very much crowded upon this sunny April afternoon, and there was only one table vacant when the major and his party entered the flowery little quadrangle, where the rippling of the fountain was unheard amidst the clattering of plates and the chinking of silver forks. It was seven o'clock, and the dinners were in high progress; the diners eating very fast, and talking a great deal faster.

The little arbour-like box to which Major Lennard conducted the two ladies was next to a similar arbour, in which there was a group of Frenchmen. Eleanor sat with her back to these men, who had very nearly finished dining, and who, from the style of their conversation, appeared

to have taken plenty of wine. The man who was evidently the entertainer sat with his legs amongst a forest of empty bottles; and the jingling of glasses and the "cloop" of newly-drawn corks drowned a good deal of the conversation.

It was not very likely that Eleanor would listen to these men's talk; or indeed, distinguish one voice from another, or one word from another, amid the noise of the crowded garden. She had quite enough to do to attend to Mrs. Lennard, who chattered all dinner time, keeping up an uninterrupted babble, in which remarks upon the business of the dinner-table were blended with criticisms upon the dress of ladies sitting in the other boxes.

"You should eat those little red things—baby-lobsters—écrivisses, I think they call them, dear; I always do. How do you like that bonnet; no, not that one—a little more St. Jacques, major,—the black one, with the peach-coloured strings? I wonder why they call all the Clarets saints, and not the Burgundies. Do you think she's pretty in the box opposite? No, you don't think much of her, do you?—*I* don't—I like the one in the blue silk, pretty well, if her eyebrows weren't so heavy."

The dinner was drawing to a close, the major was up to his eyes in roast fowl and water-cress, and Mrs. Lennard was scraping the preserved fruit out of a shellwork of heavy pastry with the point of her spoon, trifling idly now that the grand business was done, when Eleanor rose suddenly from her seat, breathless and eager, as much startled by the sound of a voice in the next arbour as if a shell had just exploded amidst the débris of the dinner.

"After?" some one had said interrogatively.

"After," answered a man whose voice had grown hoarser and thicker, as the empty bottles about the legs of the president had become more numerous, "my stripling has refused me a little bank-note of a thousand francs. Thou art too dear, my friend, he has said to me; *that* has been paid already, and enough largely. Besides, *that* was not great things. Ah! ha! I said, thou art there, my drole; you begin to fatigue yourself of your confederate. He is too much. Very well; he has his pride, he also. Thou art the last of men, and I say to you, adieu, Monsieur Launcelot Darrell."

This was the name that struck upon Eleanor's ear, and aroused the old feeling in all its strength.

The snake had only been scotched after all. It reared its head at the sound of that name like a war-horse at the blast of a trumpet. Eleanor, starting to her feet, turned round and faced the party in the next box. The man who had spoken had risen also, and was leaning across the table to reach a bottle on the other side. Thus it was that the faces of the two were opposite to each other; and Victor Bourdon, the commercial traveller, recognised Gilbert Monckton's missing wife.

He dropped the glass that he was filling, and poured some wine into the cuff of his coat, while he stared at Eleanor in drunken surprise.

"You are here, madame?" he cried, with a look in which astonishment was blended with intense delight, a sort of tipsy radiance that illuminated the Frenchman's fat face. Even in the midst of her surprise at seeing him, Eleanor perceived that blending of expression, and wondered at it.

Before she could speak, Monsieur Bourdon had left his party and had deliberately seated himself in the empty chair next her. He seized her hand in both his own, and bent over her as she shrank away from him.

"Do not recoil from me, madame," he said, always speaking in French that was considerably disguised by wine. "Ah, you do not know. I can be of the last service to you; and you can be of the last service to me also. I have embroiled myself with this Monsieur Long—cell—lotte, for always; after that which I have done for him, he is an ingrate, he is less than that," Monsieur Bourdon struck the nail of his thumb upon his front tooth with a gesture of ineffable contempt. "But why do I tell you this, madame? You were in the garden when this poor old,—this Monsieur de Crespigny, was lying dead. You remember; you know. Never mind, I lose myself the head; I have dined a little generously. Will you find yourself to-morrow, madame, in the gardens of the Palais Royal, at five hours? There is music all the Tuesdays. I have something of the last importance to tell you. Remember you that I know everything. I know that you hate this Long—cellotte. I will give you your revenge. You will come; is it not?"

"Yes," Eleanor answered, quickly.

"Upon the five hours? I shall wait for you near to the fountain."

"Yes."

Monsieur Bourdon rose, put on his hat with a drunken flourish, and went back to his friends. The Major and Mrs. Lennard had been all this time staring aghast at the drunken Frenchman. He had spoken in a loud whisper to Eleanor, but neither Frederick Lennard nor his wife retained very much of that French which had been sedulously drilled into them during their school-days, and beyond ordering a dinner, or disputing with a landlord as to the unconscionable number of wax candles in a month's hotel bill, their knowledge of the language was very limited; so Eleanor had only to explain to her friends that Monsieur Bourdon was a person whom she had known in England, and that he had brought her some news of importance which she was to hear the following day in the gardens of the Palais Royal.

Mrs. Lennard, who was the soul of good-nature, readily assented to accompany Eleanor to this rendezvous.

"Of course I'll go, my dear, with pleasure; and really I think it's quite funny, and indeed actually romantic, to go and meet a tipsy Frenchman—at least, of course he won't be tipsy to-day—near a fountain, and it reminds me of a French novel I read once, in English, which shows how

true it must have been to foreign manners; but as the major knows we're going, there's no harm, you know," Mrs. Lennard remarked, as they walked from the Hôtel du Palais to the gardens. The diners were hard at work already at the cheap restaurants, and the brass band was braying lively melodies amidst the dusty trees and flowers, the lukewarm fountain, the children, the nurse-maids, and the rather seedy-looking Parisian loungers. It was a quarter past five, for Mrs. Lennard had mislaid her parasol at the last moment, and there had been ten minutes employed in skirmish and search. Monsieur Victor Bourdon was sitting upon a bench near the fountain, but he rose and darted forward with his hat in his hand as the two ladies approached.

"I'll go and look in the jewellers' shops, Miss Villars," Mrs. Lennard said, "while you're talking to your friend, and please come and look for me when you want me. The major is to join us here, you know, at half-past six, and we're to dine at Véfours'. *Good* morning."

Mrs. Lennard bestowed these final words upon the Frenchman, accompanied by a graceful curtsey, and departed. Victor Bourdon pointed to the bench which he had just left, and Eleanor sat

down. The Frenchman seated himself next her, but at a respectful distance. Every trace of the tipsy excitement of the previous night had vanished. He was quite cool to-day; and there was a certain look of determination about his mouth, and a cold glitter in his light, greenish-grey eyes that did not promise well for any one against whom he might bear a grudge.

He spoke English to-day. He spoke it remarkably well, with only an occasional French locution.

"Madame," he began, "I shall not waste time, but come at once to the point. You hate Launcelot Darrell?"

Eleanor hesitated. There is something terrible in that word "hate." People entertain the deadly sentiment; but they shrink from its plain expression. The naked word is too appalling. It is the half-sister of murder.

"I have good reason to dislike him—" she began.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders as he interrupted her.

"Yes, you hate him!" he said; "you do not like to say so, because the word is not nice. You are—what is it you call it?—you are *shocked* by

the word. But it is so, nevertheless; you hate him, and you have cause to hate him. Yes, I know now who you are. I did not know when I first saw you in Berkshire; but I know now. Launcelot Darrell is one who cannot keep a secret, and he has told me. You are the daughter of that poor old man who killed himself in the Faubourg Saint Antoine—that is enough! You are a great heart; you would to avenge the death of your father. You saw us that night—the night the wills were change?"

"I did," Eleanor answered, looking at the man with sovereign contempt. He had spoken of the transaction as coolly as if it had been the most honourable and commonplace business.

"You are there in the darkness, and you see us," exclaimed Monsieur Bourdon, bending over Eleanor and speaking in a confidential whisper, "you watch, you look, you listen, and after, when you go into the house, you denounce Launcelot. You declare the will is forge. The will is change. You were witness, you say; you tell all that you saw! But they do not believe you. But why? Because when you say you have the true will in your pocket, you cannot find it; it is gone."

The Frenchman said this in a tone of triumph, and then paused suddenly, looking earnestly at Eleanor.

As she returned that look a new light flashed upon her mind. She began to understand the mystery of the lost will.

"It is gone," cried Monsieur Bourdon, "no trace, no vestige of it remains. You say, search the garden; the garden is search; but no result. Then the despair seizes itself of you. Launcelot mocks himself of you; he laughs at your nose. You find yourself unhappy; they do not believe you; they look coldly at you; they are harsh to you, and you fly from them. It is like that; is it not?"

"Yes," Eleanor answered.

Her breath came and went quickly; she never removed her eyes from the man's face. She began to think that her justification was perhaps only to be obtained by the agency of this disreputable Frenchman.

"What, then, of the lost will? It was not swallowed up by the earth. It could not fly itself away into the space! What became of it?"

"YOU TOOK IT FROM ME!" cried Eleanor. "Yes, I remember how closely you brushed

against me. The paper was too big to go altogether into the pocket of my dress. The ends were sticking out, and you—"

"I did all my possible to teach you a lesson! Ah, when young and beautiful ladies mix themselves with such matters, it is no wonder they make mistakes. I was watching you all the time, dear madame. I saw you change the papers, and I drew the will out of your pocket, as easily as I could rob you of that handkerchief."

The corner of a lace-bordered handkerchief was visible amid the folds of Eleanor's dress. The Frenchman took the scrap of lace between his fingers, and snatched the handkerchief away with an airy lightness of touch that might have done credit to a professional adept in the art of picking pockets. He laughed as he returned the handkerchief to Eleanor. She scarcely noticed the action, so deeply was she absorbed in the thought of the missing will.

"You have the will, then?"

"Si, madame."

"Why did you take it from me?"

"But why, madame? For many reasons. First, because it is always good to seize upon anything that other people do not know how to keep.

Again, because it is always well to have a strong hand, and a card that one's adversary does not know of. An extra king in one's coat-cuff is a good thing to have when one plays écarté, madame. That will is my extra king."

The Frenchman was silent for some little time after having made what he evidently considered rather a startling *coup*. He sat watching Eleanor with a sidelong glance, and with a cunning twinkle in his small eyes.

"Is it that we are to be friends and allies, madame?" he asked presently.

"Friends!" cried Eleanor. "Do you forget who I am? Do you forget whose daughter I am? If Launcelot Darrell's was the only name written in my father's last letter, you were not the less an accomplice in the villany that led to his death. The pupil was no doubt worthy of the master."

"You reject my friendship, then, madame? You wish to know nothing of the document that is in my possession? You treat me from high to low? You refuse to ally yourself with me? Hein?"

"I will use you as an instrument against Launcelot Darrell, if you please," Eleanor an-

swered, "since it seems that you have quarrelled with your fast friend."

"But yes, madame. When pussy has pulled the chestnuts out of the fire, she is henceforward the most unuseful of animals, and they chase her. Do you understand, madame?" cried the Frenchman, with a sudden transformation from the monkey to the tiger phase of his character, that was scarcely agreeable. "Do you understand?" he hissed. "Monsieur Launcelot has ennuied himself of me. I am chased! ME!"

He struck his gloved fingers upon his breast to give emphasis to this last word.

"It is of the last *canaille*, this young man," he continued with a shrug of disgust. "Ingrate, poltroon, scoundrel! When the forge will, forge at my suggestion by the clerk of the avoué de Vindsor, has been read, and all is finish, and no one dispute his possession, and he enter his new domain as master, the real nature of the man reveal itself. The *genuine* will is burn, he think. He defies himself of his dear friend, this poor Bourdon, and he will not even tell him who would have benefit by that genuine will. It is burn! Did he not see it scorch and blaze with his own eyes? There is nothing to fear; and for

this poor comrade who has helped my gentleman to a great fortune, he is less than that!"

Monsieur Bourdon snapped his fingers derisively, and stared fiercely at Eleanor. Then he relapsed into a sardonic smile, and went on.

"At first things go on charmingly. Monsieur Launcelot is more sweet than the honey. It is new to him to be rich, and for the first month he scatters his money with full hands. Then suddenly he stops. He cries out that he is on the road to ruin; that his friend's claims are monstrous. Faith of a gentleman, I was, perhaps, extravagant; for I am a little gamester, and I like to see life *en grand seigneur*. *A bas la moutarde,* I said. My friend is *millionnaire*. I am no more commercial traveller. Imagine, then, when mon garçon shuts up his—what is it you call it, then—cheque-book, and refuse me a paltry sum of a thousand francs. I smile in his face," said Monsieur Bourdon, nodding his head slowly, with half-closed eyes, "and I say, 'Bon jour, Monsieur Darrell; I shall make you hear some news of me before I am much older.'"

"You did not tell him that the will was in your possession?"

"A thousand thunders! No!" exclaimed the

Frenchman. "I was not so much foolish as to show him the beneath the cards. I come over here to consult a friend, an avoué."

"And he tells you—?"

"No matter. You are better than the avoué, madame. You hate Launcelot Darrell; this will is all you want to prove him a cheat and a blacksmith,—pardon, a forger."

"But to whom does M. de Crespigny leave his estate in this genuine will?" asked Mrs. Monckton.

The Frenchman smiled, and looked at Eleanor thoughtfully for a few moments before he answered her.

"Wait a little, madame," he said; "that is my little secret. Nothing for nothing is the rule here below. I have told you too much already. If you want to know more you must pay me."

"Prove that I spoke the truth upon that night," exclaimed Eleanor, "and I promise you that my husband, Gilbert Monckton, shall reward you handsomely."

"But if monsieur should repudiate your promise, madame, since he has not authorised you to give it? I am not very wise in your English law, and I would rather not mix myself in this affair.

I do not want to be produced as witness or accomplice. I want, all simply, to get a price for this document. I have something to sell. You wish to buy it. Name your price."

"I cannot," answered Eleanor; "I have no money. But I might get some, perhaps. Tell me, how much do you want?"

"A thousand pounds."

Eleanor shook her head despondently.

"Impossible!" she said; "there is no one, except my husband, from whom I could get such an amount, and I could not ask him for money, until after I had proved Launcelot Darrell's infamy."

The Frenchman watched her closely. He saw that she had spoken the truth.

"You do not know how much this will is worth to you, madame," he said. "Remember, I could make terms with Launcelot Darrell, and sell it to him for perhaps ten times the sum I ask of you. But Monsieur Darrell was insolent to me; he struck me once with the butt end of his hunting-whip; I do not forget. I could get more money from him; but I can get my revenge through you."

He hissed out these words between his teeth;

and glared vindictively at the fountain, as if the phantom of Launcelot Darrell had been looking at him out of the sparkling water-drops. Revenge was not a beautiful thing, as represented by Victor Bourdon. Perhaps Eleanor may have thought of this as she looked at him.

"I want my revenge," he repeated; "after all, gold is a villain thing. Revenge is more dear—to gentlemen. Besides, I do not think you would pay me ungenerously if I helped you to crush this scoundrel, and helped you to something else, by the market, Hein?"

"I tell you again, that you shall be well rewarded," Mrs. Monckton said, gravely.

"Very well, then, listen to me. It is to-day, Tuesday. In a week I shall have time to think. In a week you will have leisure to gather together a little money—all you can get. At the end of that time come to me at my apartment—bring with you any friend you like. I do not think that you are traitor—or ingrate—and you see I trust you. I will have my friend, the—what you call him—attorney, with me—and we may come to an arrangement. You shall sign a contract—well ruled—for to pay me in the future, and then the will is to you. You return to England; you

say, 'Aha, Monsieur Launcelot, walk out of that. It is your turn to be chased.'"

Victor Bourdon grinned ferociously, then took a memorandum-book from his pocket, wrote a few words in pencil, tore out the leaf upon which they were written, and handed it to Mrs. Monckton.

"That is my address," he said. "On Tuesday, at seven o'clock in the evening, I shall expect to see you there, and your friend. But if you think to betray me, remember I am not the man to forgive an injury. I have the honour to salute you, madame. Bon jour."

He took off his hat with a flourish, and walked away. Eleanor sat for some minutes where he had left her, thinking over what had happened, before she went into the arcades to look for Mrs. Lennard.

That night she told the Lennards who she was, and all her story. She felt that it was better to do so. She must have freedom now to act, and to act promptly. She could not do this, and yet preserve her secret. Her old ally, Richard Thornton, would be indispensable to her in this crisis, and she wrote to him early on the morning after her interview with Monsieur Bourdon, imploring him to come to her immediately.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HORRORS OF DELIRIUM TREMENS.

No letter came from Richard Thornton. Eleanor was seized with a kind of panic as the days went by, and there was no answer from the young man, the faithful friend, without whose help she felt herself so powerless.

Eleanor had addressed her letter to the Pilasters, enclosed in an envelope directed to Signora Picirillo, with a few hurried lines requesting that it might be immediately forwarded to the scene-painter. He was in Scotland still, very likely, and some days must elapse before he could respond to Eleanor's summons. She felt assured that he would come to her. There are some friends whose goodness we no more doubt than we doubt the power of God; and Richard Thornton was one of these.

But the week passed, and no reply came to Eleanor's appeal for help; so she began to feel

that she stood alone, and must act for herself. She must act for herself, since to think of getting any assistance from either the major or his wife in this business, which demanded foresight, coolness, and diplomacy, would have been about as reasonable as to apply to one of the children playing under the trees in the gardens of the Tuilleries.

As far as sympathy went, Major and Mrs. Lennard were all that the most exacting individual could require. The major offered to do anything in a muscular way on behalf of his wife's friend. Should he punch the head of that scoundrelly Frenchman? Should he go over to England and horsewhip Launcelot Darrell, and bring Gilbert Monckton to reason, and play up old gooseberry altogether? This good-natured Hercules was ready to hit out right and left in the defence of poor Eleanor.

But the one friend whom Mrs. Monckton wanted in this crisis was Richard Thornton. Richard the clear-sighted, even-tempered, unprejudiced young man, who was ready to go through fire and water for the sake of his beautiful adopted sister, without noise or bluster; and when the Tuesday, the day appointed by the Frenchman for

Eleanor's visit to his apartments, came, and Richard Thornton did not come with it, the lonely girl almost gave way to despair.

She felt that she had to encounter a wretch who was utterly without honour or honesty, and who, seeing the value which she set upon the possession of Maurice de Crespigny's will, would be all the more exacting in his demands. And she had nothing to bribe him with; nothing.

She had been too proud to appeal to her husband. For ever impulsive, for ever inconsiderate, she had not stopped to think that he of all others was the most fitting person to stand by her in this crisis. At first the thought of writing to Gilbert Monckton had indeed flashed across her mind, but in the next moment she had remembered the bitter humiliation of her last failure.

She could not endure another such degradation; and she had seen treachery and dishonour so long triumph over the simple force of truth, that she had begun to think that wrong was stronger than right, and always must be victorious.

"If I were to write and ask Gilbert to come to me, this Frenchman would perhaps disappear before my husband could arrive; or he would be afraid of Gilbert, very likely, and would deny any

knowledge of the will, and I should appear a convicted trickster, who had heaped up one falsehood upon another, in the weak attempt to justify herself. No. Gilbert Monckton shall hear nothing of me until I can go to him with Maurice de Crespigny's will in my hands."

But in the meantime this helpless girl's anxiety grew every hour more intense. What reliance could she place upon the words of the Frenchman? She had encountered him while he was still smarting under the sense of his wrongs, and in that stage of his feelings, revenge had seemed even sweeter to him than gain. But this state of things might not endure very long. The commercial traveller might listen to the dictates of reason rather than to the fiery promptings of passion, and might begin to think that a substantial recompense in the shape of money was better than any sugar-plum in the way of revenge. He had said that Launcelot Darrell would be willing to give him ten times a thousand pounds for the genuine will. What more likely than that Monsieur Victor Bourdon should have thought better of his original design, and opened negotiations with the new master of Woodlands.

Monsieur Bourdon would in all probability have

done precisely this, had he not been hindered by one of those unlooked-for and purely providential circumstances which so often help single and simple-minded Truth in her encounters with versatile and shifty Falsehood.

At half-past six o'clock upon the appointed evening, Eleanor Monckton left the Hôtel du Palais, escorted by Major Lennard, on her way to the Frenchman's lodging. She had waited until the last moment in the hope of Richard Thornton's arrival, but he had not come; and she had been fain to accept the aid of this good-natured over-grown schoolboy, who still persisted that the immediate punching of Victor Bourdon's head would be the best and surest means of getting possession of the will.

"Let me punch the feller's head, Miss Vil— beg pardon, Mrs. Monckton. The idea of your being married to old Monckton! He ain't any older than me, you know, but I always call him old Monckton. Let me punch this dam Frenchman's head, that'll bring the feller to book in next to no time, and then we can do what we like with him."

But Eleanor impressed upon her stalwart protector that there must be no muscular demonstra-

tion, and that the conduct of the interview was to be left entirely to her.

"I don't in the least hope that he'll give up the will without a bribe," Eleanor said; "he is the last man upon earth to do that."

"I'll tell you what, then, Mrs. Monckton," exclaimed the major, "I haven't any *ready* money, I never have had, since I borrowed sixpences of a sucking bill-discounter at the first school I ever went to; but I'll give you my acceptance. Let this fellow draw upon me for a thousand at three months, and give up the document for that consideration. Monckton will enable me to meet the bill, no doubt, when he finds I was of service to you in this business."

Eleanor looked at the major with a gleam of hope in her face. But that transient gleam very quickly faded. She had only a vague idea of the nature and properties of accommodation bills; but she had a very positive notion of Victor Bourdon's character, and, though this plan *sounded* feasible enough, she did not think it would succeed.

"You are very good to me, Major Lennard," she said, "and believe me I appreciate your kindness; but I do not think that this Frenchman will consent to take anything but ready money. He

could get that from Launcelot Darrell, remember, at any time."

Eleanor's only hope was the one chance that she might induce Victor Bourdon to accept her promise of a reward from Gilbert Monckton *after* the production of the will.

The neighbourhood in which the commercial traveller lived, whenever he made Paris his head-quarters, was one of the dingiest localities in the city. Major Lennard and Eleanor, after making numerous inquiries, and twice losing their way, found themselves at last in a long narrow street, one side of which was chiefly dead-wall, broken here and there by a dilapidated gateway or a dingy window. At one corner there was a shop for the sale of unredeemed pledges; a queer old shop, in whose one murky window obsolete scraps of jewellery, odd watch-keys, impossible watches with cracked enamel dials and crippled hands that pointed to hours whose last moments had passed away for half a century; mysterious, incomprehensible garments, whose fashion was forgotten, and whose first owners were dead and gone; poor broken-down clocks, in tawdry ormolu cases, that had stood upon lodging-house mantel-pieces, indifferently telling the wrong time to

generations of lodgers; an old guitar; a stringless violin; poor, frail, cracked cups and saucers, that had been precious once, by reason of the lips that had drunk out of them; a child's embroidered frock; a battered christening cup; a tattered missal; an odd volume of "The Wandering Jew;" amid a hundred other pitiful relics which poverty barters for a crust of bread, faded in the evening sunlight, and waited for some eccentric purchaser to take a fancy to them. Next door to this sarcophagus of the past there was an eating-house, neat and almost cheerful, where one could have a soup, three courses, and half a bottle of wine for fivepence. The whole neighbourhood seemed to be, somehow or other, overshadowed by churches, and, pervaded by the perpetual tramp of funerals; and, lying low and out of the way of all cheerful traffic, was apt to have a depressing effect upon the spirits of frivolous people.

Eleanor, leading the major—who was of about as much use to her as a blind man is to his dog—succeeded at last in finding the house which boasted Monsieur Victor Bourdon amongst its inhabitants. I say "amongst" advisedly; for as there was the office of a popular bi-weekly periodical upon the first-floor, a greengrocer in

the *rez-de-chaussée,* a hairdresser who professed to cut and friz the hair, on the second story, and a mysterious lady, whose calling was represented by a faded pictorial board, resident somewhere under the roof, the commercial traveller was a very unimportant inhabitant, an insignificant nomad, replaced to-day by a student *en droit,* to-morrow by a second-rate actor at a fifth-rate theatre.

Eleanor found this when she came to make inquiries of the portress as to the possibility of seeing Monsieur Bourdon. This lady, who was knitting, and whose very matronly contour made it impossible for her to see her knitting-needles, told Eleanor that Monsieur Bourdon was very unlikely to be at home at that time. He was apt to return late at night, upon the two hours, in effect, between two wines, and at those times he was enough abrupt, and was evidently by no means a favourite with madame the portress. But on looking into a dusky corner where some keys were hanging upon a row of rusty nails, madame informed Eleanor that Monsieur Bourdon *was* at home, as his key was not amongst the rest, and it was his habit to leave it in her care when he went out. The portress seemed very much struck by this discovery, for she remarked

that the last time she had seen Monsieur Bourdon go out had been early in the morning of Sunday, and that she did not remember having seen him re-enter.

But upon this a brisk young person of twelve or thirteen, who was busy getting up fine linen in the recesses of the lodge, cried out in a very shrill voice that Monsieur Bourdon had returned before mid-day on Sunday, looking a little ill, and dragging himself with a fatigued air.

He was at home, then, the portress exclaimed; at least, she did not utter any equivalent to our English word home, and in that evinced considerable wisdom, since a French lodging is a place so utterly unhomelike, that the meanest second-floor at Islington or Chelsea, presided over by the most unconscionable of British landladies, becomes better than all the pleasures and palaces we can roam amidst—and it is not everybody who has the chance of roaming amidst pleasures and palaces—by the very force of comparison. Monsieur was *chez lui*, the portress said, and would madame ascend? Monsieur's apartment was on the entresol, with windows giving upon the street. Madame would see a black door facing her upon the first landing.

Eleanor went up a short flight of steps, followed by the major. She knocked upon the panel of the black door—once, twice, three times; but there was no answer.

"I'd lay a fiver the feller's gone out again," the major exclaimed; "that jabbering Frenchwoman didn't seem to know what she was talking about."

But Eleanor knocked a fourth time, and very much louder than she had knocked before. There was no answer even this time; but a voice was heard within, blaspheming aloud with horrible French execrations that seemed to freeze Eleanor's blood as she listened to them.

She did listen to them, involuntarily, as people often listen in a crowded thoroughfare to the obnoxious clamour of a drunken man, paralysed for the moment by the horror of his hideous oaths.

Eleanor turned very pale, and looked despairingly at the major.

"Hark," she whispered, "he is quarrelling with some one."

The big soldier deliberately turned himself into a convenient position for listening, and flattened his ear against the keyhole.

"No, he ain't quarrellin' with any one," the major said, presently. "I can't make much out of his lingo, but there's only one voice. He's all alone, and goin' on like a madman."

The major opened the door softly as he spoke. Monsieur Bourdon's apartment was divided into two low-roofed chambers, a little larger than comfortable pigeon-holes; and in the inner and smaller chamber Eleanor and her companion saw the commercial traveller wandering backwards and forwards in his obscure den, only dressed in his trowsers and shirt, and gesticulating like a madman.

Mrs. Monckton clung to the soldier's arm. She had some cause for fear, for in the next moment the Frenchman descried his visitors, and with a howl of rage, rushed at the major's throat.

The most intellectual and diplomatic individual in Christendom would have been of very little service to Eleanor at that moment, if he had been also a coward. Major Lennard lifted the commercial traveller in his arms, as easily as if that gentleman had been a six months' old baby, carried him into the next room where there was a narrow little bedstead, flung him on to the mattrass, and held him there.

"You'll find a silk handkerchief in my pocket, my dear," he said to Eleanor, "if you'll be so kind as to pull it out. Voulez-vous gardez-vous trang-keel, dong, vous—scoundrel!" he exclaimed, addressing himself to the struggling Frenchman.

Mrs. Monckton obeyed. She fell into her place quite naturally, giving way before the major. He was the hero of the moment. Frederic Soulié has said that the meanest actor who ever trod the boards of a theatre, has some inspired moment in which he is great. I fancy it must be pretty much the same in the drama of life. This was the major's moment; and he arose out of his normal inanity, resplendent with unconscious grandeur.

The silk handkerchief was a large one, and Major Lennard used it very dexterously about Monsieur Bourdon's wrists; then he found another handkerchief in another pocket, and used it as a bandage for the Frenchman's ankles; and having done this he sat down by the bedside and contemplated his handiwork complacently, puffing and blowing a little while he did so.

Victor Bourdon lay very still, glaring at the ponderous soldier with eyes that were like those of a wild beast.

"I know thee," he exclaimed; "thou hast been

with me all the night, thou hast sat upon my chest; ah, Grêdin! thou art the biggest of all the demons that torment me. Thou breathest the fire and the sulphur, and thy breath burns me, and now thou hast attached my hands with bands of iron, white hot, and thou hast tied my ankles with living scorpions!"

Eleanor stood at a few paces from the bed, listening with horror to the man's delirious ravings.

"What is it?" she asked, in a subdued voice. "Is it a fever that makes him like this. Or has he gone mad?"

The major shook his head.

"I think I can guess pretty well what's the matter with the poor devil," he said: "he's been going it a little too fast. He's got a touch of del. trem."

"Del. trem.!"

"Delirium tremens, my dear," answered the major. "Yes, you can hear his teeth chattering now this minute. I had it once when I was up the country, and our fellers took to living upon brandy pawnee. I had rather a sharp time of it, while it lasted; used to fancy the tent was on fire; wanted to go out tiger-hunting in the middle of the night; tried to set the bed-clothes alight

to cure myself of the hiccough; and ran after Meg with a razor early one morning. This man has got a touch of it, Mrs. Monckton, and I don't think we shall get much reason out of him to-night."

The conduct of Monsieur Victor Bourdon, who was at that moment holding a very animated discourse with a dozen or so of juvenile demons supposed to be located in the bed-curtains, went very far towards confirming the major's assertion.

Eleanor sat down at the little table, upon which the dirty litter of the Frenchman's last meal was huddled into a heap and intermixed with writing materials; an ink bottle, and a mustard pot, a quill pen, and a tea-spoon lying side by side. The girl's fortitude had given way before this new and most cruel disappointment. She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud.

Major Lennard was very much distressed at this unexpected collapse upon the part of his chief. He was very big, and rather stupid; but he had one of those tender childish natures which never learn to be hard and unmerciful. He was for ever patting the shock heads of dirty pauper children, for ever fumbling in his pockets for copper coin, always open to the influence of any

story of womanly distress, and quite unable to withstand the dingiest female, if she could only produce the merest phantom of a tear to be wiped away furtively from one eye, while the other looked round the corner to see if the shot went home.

He looked piteously at Eleanor, as she sat sobbing passionately, half unconscious of his presence, forgetful of everything except that this last hope had failed her.

"I thought that he might leave Paris, and go back to Launcelot Darrell," she said, in a broken voice, "but I never thought of anything like this."

"Sh-sh-sh-sh!" cried Monsieur Bourdon from the bed. "Ftz! Cats, cats! Sh-sh-sh-sh! Chase those cats, somebody! There's the girl Faust saw upon the Bracken with the little rat running out of her mouth! There, sitting at the table! Go then, Voleuse, Gueuse, Infâme!" screamed the Frenchman, glaring at Eleanor.

The girl took no notice of him. Her sobs grew every moment louder and more hysterical. The major looked at her helplessly.

"Don't," he said, "my good creature, don't now. This is really dreadful, 'pon my soul, now.

Come, come, now; cheer up, my dear, cheer up. You won't do anything by giving way, you know. I always tell Margaret that, when she thinks she can catch the train by sitting on the ground and crying because her portmanteaus won't shut. Nobody ever did, you know, and if you don't put your shoulder to the wheel——"

The major might have rambled on in this wise for some time; but the sobbing grew louder; and he felt that it was imperatively necessary that something energetic should be done in this crisis. A bright thought flashed upon him as he looked hopelessly round the room, and in another moment he had seized a small white crockery-ware jug from the Frenchman's toilet table, and launched its contents at Eleanor's head.

This was a second master-stroke. The girl looked up with her head dripping, but with her courage revived by the shock her senses had received.

She took off her wet bonnet, and pushed the drenched hair from her forehead.

"Oh, major," she said, "I know I have been very silly. But I was so taken by surprise. It seems so cruel that this should happen. I shall never get the will now."

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear," exclaimed Major Lennard. "What's to prevent your getting it?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's to prevent your *taking it?* We're not going to stand upon ceremony with such a feller as this, are we, Mrs. Monckton? He stole the will from you, and if you can get the chance, you'll return the compliment by stealing it from him. Fair play's a jewel, my dear Mrs. M., and nothing could be fairer than that. So we'll set to work at once; and I hope you'll excuse the cold water, which was meant in kindness, I assure you."

Eleanor smiled, and gave the major her hand.

"I'm sure it was," she said. "I scarcely liked the idea of your coming with me, major, for fear you should do some mischief by being a little too impetuous. But I don't know what I should have done without you."

Major Lennard shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating gesture.

"I *might* have been useful to you, my dear," he said, "if the feller had been all right and I could have punched his head; but one can't get any credit out of a chap when he's in that state," added the major, pointing to the commercial

traveller who was taking journeys on his own account into the horrible regions of an intemperate man's fancy.

"Now the first thing we shall want, Mrs. Monckton," said the major, "is a candle and a box of lucifers. We must have a light before we can do anything."

It was not dark yet; but the twilight was growing greyer and greyer, and the shadows were gathering in the corners of the room.

Victor Bourdon lay glaring at his two visitors through the dusk, while the major groped about the mantelpiece for a box of lucifers. He was not long in finding what he wanted. He struck a little waxen match against the greasy paper of the wall, and then lighted an end of candle in a tawdry cheap china candlestick.

"Ease her, ease her!" cried the Frenchman; "I see the lights ahead off Normandy, on the side of the wind. She'll strike upon a rock before we know where we are. What are they about, these English sailors? are they blind, that they don't see the light?"

Major Lennard, with the candle in his hand, set to work to look for the missing document. He did not look very systematically, but as he

pulled out every drawer and opened every cupboard, and shook out the contents of every receptacle, flinging them remorselessly upon the floor, he certainly looked pretty effectually. Eleanor, kneeling on the ground amongst the chaotic heaps of clothes and papers, tattered novels, broken meerschaum pipes and stale cigar ends, examined every pocket, every book, and every paper separately, but with no result. The drawers had been ransacked, the cupboards disembowelled, a couple of portmanteaus completely emptied. Every nook and corner of the two small rooms had been most thoroughly searched, first by the major in a slap-dash and military manner; afterwards by Eleanor, who did her work with calmness and deliberation, though her heart was beating, and the hot blood surging in her over-excited brain. Every possible hiding-place in the two rooms had been examined, but the will had not been found.

Every possible hiding-place had been examined; except the pockets of Victor Bourdon's trousers, and the bed upon which he lay.

The major stopped to scratch his head in despair, and stood staring hopelessly at the unhappy victim of his own vices, who was still

raving, still remonstrating with invisible demons. But Eleanor aroused her friend from this state of stupefaction.

"He may have the will about him, major," she said.

"Aha!" cried the soldier, "if he has, I'll have it out of him. Give it me, you unconscionable blackguard," he exclaimed, pouncing upon the delirious Frenchman. "I'll have it out of you, you scoundrel. Tell me where it is directly. *Dites-moi où il est, dong!* What have you done with it, sir? What have you done with Maurice de Crespigny's will?"

The familiar name aroused a transitory gleam of consciousness in Victor Bourdon.

"Ha, ha," he cried with a malicious chuckle. "Maurice de Crespigny, the old, the parent of that Long—cellotte; but I will have my revenge; but he shall not enjoy his riches. The will, the will; that is mine, it will give me all."

He raised himself by a great effort into a sitting posture, and made frantic endeavours to disengage his hands.

"He is thinking of the will," cried Eleanor; "loosen his wrists, major! Pray, pray do, before the thought leaves him."

Major Lennard obeyed. He loosened the knot of the silk handkerchief, but before he could remove it, Victor Bourdon had pulled his hands through the slackened noose, and clutched at something in his breast. It was a folded paper which he snatched out of the bosom of his shirt, and waved triumphantly above his head.

"Aha, Monsieur Long—cellotte!" he screamed. "I will pay thee for thy insolence, my friend."

But before the Frenchman's uplifted arm had described a second circle in the air above his head, the major swooped down upon him, snatched away the paper, handed it to Eleanor, and re-secured Monsieur Bourdon's wrists with the silk handkerchief.

So brief had been the interval of semi-consciousness, that the commercial traveller had already forgotten all about Launcelot Darrell and his own wrongs, and had rambled off again into impotent execrations against the imaginary demons amongst the bed-curtains.

Eleanor unfolded the paper, but she only read the first few words, "I, Maurice de Crespigny, being at this time, &c.," for before she could read more, the door of the outer room was suddenly

opened, and Richard Thornton hurried through into the bed-chamber.

But not Richard only, behind him came Gilbert Monckton, and it was he into whose outstretched arms Eleanor flung herself.

"You will believe me now, Gilbert," she cried. "I have found the proof of Launcelot Darrell's guilt at last."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAURICE DE CRESPIGNY'S BEQUEST.

Richard Thornton had received Eleanor's letter in Edinburgh, and had been travelling perpetually since his receipt of the girl's eager epistle. He had calculated that by travelling day and night he should be able to accomplish a great achievement in the four days that were to elapse between the hour in which he received Eleanor's letter and the hour appointed for the interview with the Frenchman. This achievement was the reconciliation of Gilbert Monckton and his wife.

For this purpose the devoted young man had travelled from Edinburgh to London, and from London to Torquay, back to London again, with Mr. Monckton for his companion, and from London to Paris, still in that gentleman's companionship. Gilbert Monckton would have thought it a small thing to have given half his

fortune in payment of the tidings which the scene-painter carried to him.

He should see his wife again; his bright and beautiful young wife, whom he had so cruelly wronged, and so stupidly misunderstood.

Human nature is made up of contradictions. From the hour in which Gilbert Monckton had turned his back upon Tolldale Priory, deserting his young wife in a paroxysm of jealous anger, until now, he had done nothing but repent of his own work. Why had he disbelieved in her? How had he been vile enough to doubt her? Had she not stood before him, with the glorious light of truth shining out of her beautiful face? Even had he not already repented, Eleanor's letter would have opened the jealous husband's eyes to his own folly; that brief offended letter in which the brave girl had repudiated her husband's offer of wealth and independence; and had declared her proud determination to go out into the world once more, and to get her own living, and to accept nothing from the man who doubted her truth.

The lawyer had made every effort to lure the lost bird back to its deserted nest. But if you render your wife's existence intolerable, and she

runs away from you in despair, it is not always possible to bring her back to your halls; though you may be never so penitent for your offences against her. Gilbert Monckton had employed every possible means to discover his wife's whereabouts; but had failed most completely to do so. His search was futile; his advertisements were unanswered; and, very lonely and miserable, he had dragged out the last six weeks, in constant oscillation between London and Torquay; always making some new effort to obtain tidings of the missing girl; perpetually beguiled a little way onward with false hopes, only to be disappointed. He had gone again and again to Signora Picirillo; but had received no comfort from her, inasmuch as the music mistress knew no more about Eleanor than he did.

It is not to be wondered, then, that when Richard Thornton appeared at Torquay, carrying with him Eleanor's letter, he was received with open arms by the penitent husband. Not an hour was wasted by the eager travellers, but use what haste they might, they could not hasten the Dover express, or the Calais packets, or the comfortable jog-trot pace of the train between Calais and Paris; so they had only been able to arrive

at eight o'clock in the dusky April evening, just in time to behold Major Lennard in his moment of triumph.

Gilbert Monckton extended his hand to the stalwart soldier, after the events of the evening had been hurriedly related by Eleanor and her companion.

"You robbed me of a wife twenty years ago, Major Lennard," he said, "but you have restored another wife to me to-night."

"Then I suppose we're quits," the major exclaimed cheerfully, "and we can go back to the Palais and have a devilled lobster, Hay? I suppose we must do something for this poor devil, though, first, Hay?"

Mr. Monckton heartily concurred in this suggestion; and Richard Thornton, who was better acquainted with Paris than any of his companions, ran down-stairs, told the portress of the malady which had stricken down the lodger in the entresol, despatched the sharp young damsel with the shrill voice in search of a sick nurse, and went himself to look for a doctor. In a little more than half-an-hour both these officials had arrived, and Mr. Monckton and his wife, Major Lennard, and Richard departed, leaving

the Frenchman in the care of his two compatriots. But before Gilbert Monckton left the apartment, he gave the nurse special orders respecting the sick man. She was not to let him leave his rooms upon any pretence whatever; not even if he should appear to become reasonable.

Mr. Monckton went to the Hôtel du Palais with his young wife, and, for the first time since he had been wronged, forgave the frivolous woman who had jilted him. She had been very kind to Eleanor, and he was in a humour to be pleased with any one who had been good to his wife. So the lawyer shook hands very heartily with Mrs. Lennard, and promised that she should see her daughter before long.

"The poor little girl has had a hard trial lately, Mrs. Lennard, through my folly, and I owe her some atonement. I separated her from her natural protectors, because I was presumptuous enough to imagine that I was better fitted to plan her destiny; and after all I have wrecked her girlish hopes, poor child! But I don't think the damage is irreparable: I think she'll scarcely break her heart about Launcelot Darrell."

In all this time nobody had cared to ask any questions about the will. Eleanor had handed it to her husband; and Gilbert Monckton had put it, still folded, into his pocket. But when the devilled lobster and the sparkling Moselle, which the major insisted upon ordering, had been discussed, and the table cleared, Mr. Monckton took the important document from his pocket.

"We may as well look at poor De Crespigny's last testament," he said, "and see who has been most injured by the success of Launcelot Darrell's fabrication."

He read the first two sheets of the will to himself, slowly and thoughtfully. He remembered every word of those two first sheets. So far the real will was verbatim the same as the forged document: Gilbert Monckton could therefore now understand why that fabricated will had seemed so genuine. The fabrication had been copied from the original paper. It was thus that the forgery had borne the stamp of the testator's mind. The only difference between the two documents lay in the last and most important clause.

The lawyer read aloud this last sheet of Maurice de Crespigny's will.

"I devise and bequeath all the residue and remainder of my real and personal property unto Hortensia Bannister, the daughter of my old and deceased college friend, George Vane, and my valued friend Peter Sedgewick, of Cheltenham, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, upon trust, for the sole and separate use of Eleanor, the daughter of my said dear deceased friend, George Vane, by his last wife, Eleanor Thompson, during her life, free from the control, debts, or engagements of any husband she may at any time have, and so that she shall not have power to anticipate the rents, interest, and annual proceeds thereof, and upon and after her decease, for such persons, estates, and in such manner as she shall, whether covert or uncovert, by will appoint; and in default of and subject to any such appointment, for the said Eleanor, the daughter of the said George Vane, her heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, according to the nature of the said property. And in case the said Eleanor shall have departed this life during my lifetime, or in case the said last-named trustees cannot discover the said Eleanor Vane within four years after my decease, then they shall consider the said Eleanor Vane dead,

and therefrom I give and devise the said residuary estates to be equally divided between my said three nieces, Sarah, Lavinia, and Ellen, absolutely."

"It is fortunate that the money is left to trustees for your separate use, Eleanor," Mr. Monckton said. "If it had been otherwise, the gift would have been invalid, since I, your husband, was one of the witnesses to the will."

A torrent of congratulations from Major and Mrs. Lennard, and Richard Thornton, almost overwhelmed Eleanor; but she was still more overwhelmed by her astonishment at the wording of the will.

"The money left to me!" she exclaimed. "I didn't want it. I am sorry it should be so. It will seem now as if I had been plotting to get this fortune. I don't want it; I only want my revenge."

Gilbert Monckton narrowly watched his wife's astonished face. He saw no look of triumph, no smile of gratification. At least she was free from any mercenary baseness. He took her a little way from the rest of the party, and looked earnestly into her fearless eyes.

"My own dear love," he said, "I have learned a hard lesson, and I believe that I shall profit by it. I will never doubt you again. But tell me, Eleanor, tell me once and for ever! have you ever loved Launcelot Darrell? Have any of your actions been prompted by jealousy?"

"Not one," cried Mrs. Monckton. "I have never loved him, and I have never been jealous of him. From first to last I have been actuated by one motive, and one alone—the duty I owe to my dead father."

She had not abandoned her purpose, then. No; the lurid star that had beckoned her forward still shone before her. It was so near now, that its red splendour filled the universe. The young wife was pleased to be reconciled to her husband; but with the sense that he was restored to her once more, the memory of the dreary interval in which she had lost him, melted away from her mind, and Launcelot Darrell—Launcelot Darrell, the destroyer of her dead father, became once more paramount in her thoughts.

"Oh, Gilbert!" she said, clasping her hands about her husband's arm and looking up in his face, "you'll take me back to England at once, won't you?"

"Yes, my dear," Mr. Monckton answered, with a sigh. "I'll do whatever you wish."

There was a jealous pain at his heart as he spoke. His wife was pure, and true, and beautiful; but this strange purpose of her life divided her from him, and left his own existence very blank.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DAY OF RECKONING.

LAUNCELOT DARRELL and his mother had inhabited Woodlands for a little more than a fortnight. The painters, and paper-hangers, and upholsterers had done a great deal to alter the handsome country-house; for Mr. Darrell had no wish to be reminded of his dead uncle; and familiar chairs and tables have an unpleasant faculty of suggesting tiresome thoughts, and recalling faded faces that had better be forgotten. Almost all the old furniture had been swept away, therefore, and the young man had behaved very generously to his maiden aunts, who had furnished a small house in Windsor with the things that Launcelot had banished from Woodlands. These poor disappointed ladies had located themselves in a quiet little *cul-de-sac*, squeezed in between the hilly street and the castle, with the idea that the wild

dissipations of a town life would enable them to forget their wrongs.

So Launcelot Darrell and his mother reigned at Woodlands instead of the maiden sisters; and Parker, the butler, and Mrs. Jepcott, the housekeeper, waited upon a new master and mistress.

The young man had chafed bitterly at his poverty, and had hated himself and all the world, because of those humiliations to which a man who is too idle to work, and too poor to live without work, is always more or less subject. But, alas! now that by the commission of a crime he had attained the great end of his ambition, he found that the game was not worth the candle; and that in his most fretful moments before Maurice de Crespigny's death he had never suffered as much as he now suffered, daily and hourly.

The murderers of the unfortunate Mr. Ware ate a hearty supper of pork chops while their victim lay, scarcely cold, in a pond beside the high road; but it is not everybody who is blessed with the strength of mind possessed by those gentlemen. Launcelot Darrell could not shake off the recollection of what he had done. From morning till night, from night till morning, the same thoughts, the same fears, were perpetually

pressing upon him. In the eyes of every servant who looked at him; in the voice of every creature who spoke to him; in the sound of every bell that rang in the roomy country-house, there lurked a something that inspired the miserable terror of detection. It haunted him in every place; it met him at every turn. The knowledge that he was in the power of two bad, unscrupulous men, the lawyer's clerk and Victor Bourdon, made him the most helpless of slaves. Already he had found what it was to be in the power of a vicious and greedy wretch. The clerk had been easily satisfied by the gift of a round sum of money, and had levanted before his employer returned from America. But Victor Bourdon became insatiable. He was a gamester and a drunkard; and he expected to find in Launcelot Darrell's purse a gold mine that was never to be exhausted.

He had abandoned himself to the wildest dissipation in the worst haunts of London after Maurice de Crespigny's death; and had appeared at Woodlands at all times and seasons, demanding enormous sums of his miserable victim. At first terror sealed Launcelot Darrell's lips, and he acceded to the most extravagant demands of

his accomplice; but at last his temper gave way, and he refused that "paltry note for a thousand francs," to which the Frenchman alluded in his interview with Eleanor. After this refusal there was a desperate quarrel between the two men, at the end of which the commercial traveller received a thrashing, and was turned out of doors by the master of Woodlands.

The young man had been quite reckless of consequences in his passion; but when he grew a little calmer he began to reflect upon the issue of this quarrel.

"I cannot see what harm the man can do me?" he thought: "to accuse me is to accuse himself also. And then who would believe his unsupported testimony? I could laugh at him as a madman."

Launcelot Darrell had no knowledge of the existence of the real will. He implicitly believed that it had been burned before his own eyes, and that Eleanor's assertion to the contrary had been only a woman's falsehood invented to terrify him.

"If the girl had once had the will in her possession she would never have been such a fool as to lose it," he argued.

But notwithstanding all this he felt a vague fear, all the more terrible because of its indefinite character. He had placed himself in a false position. The poet is born and not made; and perhaps the same thing may be said of the criminal. The genius of crime, like the genius of song, may be a capricious blossom, indigenous to such and such a soil, but not to be produced by cultivation. However this may be, Launcelot Darrell was not a great criminal. He had none of the reckless daring, the marvellous power of dissimulation, the blind indifference to the future, which make a Palmer, a Cartouche, a Fauntleroy, or a Roupell. He was wretched because of what he had done; and he allowed everybody to perceive his wretchedness.

Mrs. Darrell saw that her son was miserable in spite of his newly-acquired wealth; and a horrible terror seized upon her. Her sisters had taken good care to describe to her the scene that had occurred at Woodlands upon the night of the old man's death. She had watched her son, as only mothers can watch the children they love; and she had seen that his dead kinsman's fortune had brought him no happiness. She had questioned him, but had received only sulky, ungracious

answers; and she had not the heart to press him too closely.

The mother and son were alone in the dining-room at Woodlands about a week after the scene in Monsieur Victor Bourdon's apartment. They had dined *tête-à-tête*. The dessert had not been removed, and the young man was still sitting at the bottom of the long table, lounging lazily in his comfortable chair, and very often refilling his glass from the claret jug on his right hand. The three long windows were open, and the soft May twilight crept into the room. A tall shaded lamp stood in the centre of the table, making a great spot of yellow light in the dusk. Below the lamp there was a confused shimmer of cut glass, upon which the light trembled, like moonbeams upon running water. There were some purple grapes and a litter of vine leaves in a dessert dish of Sèvres china; the spikey crown of a pine-apple; and scarlet strawberries that made splashes of vivid colour amid the sombre green. The pictured face of the dead man hanging upon the wall behind Launcelot Darrell's chair seemed to look reproachfully out of the shadows. The ruby draperies shading the open windows grew darker with the fading of the light. The faint odour of lilacs and

hawthorn blossoms blew in from the garden, and the evening stillness was only broken by the sound of leaves stirred faintly by a slow night wind that crept amongst the trees.

Mrs. Darrell was sitting in the recess of one of the open windows, with some needlework in her lap. She had brought her work into the dining-room after dinner, because she wished to be with her son; and she knew that Launcelot would sit for the best part of the evening brooding over his half-filled glass. The young man was most completely miserable. The great wrong he had done had brought upon him a torture which he was scarcely strong enough to endure. If he could have undone that wrong—if——! No! That way lay such shame and degradation as he could never stoop to endure.

"It was all my great-uncle's fault," he repeated to himself, doggedly. "What business had he to make the will of a madman? Whom have I robbed, after all? Only a specious adventuress, the intriguing daughter of a selfish spendthrift."

Such thoughts as these were for ever rising in the young man's mind. He was thinking them to-night, while his mother sat in the window,

watching her son's face furtively. He was only roused from his reverie by the sound of wheels upon the gravel drive, the opening of a carriage-door, and a loud ringing of the bell.

The arrival of any unexpected visitor always frightened him; so it was nothing unusual for him to get up from his chair and go to the door of the room to listen for the sound of voices in the hall.

To-night he turned deadly pale, as he recognised a familiar voice; the voice of Gilbert Monckton, whom he had not seen since the reading of the will.

Launcelot Darrell drew back as the servant approached the door, and in another moment the man opened it, and announced Mr. Monckton, Mrs. Monckton, Mr. Thornton, Monsieur Bourdon. He would have announced Mr. John Ketch, I dare say, just as coolly.

Launcelot Darrell planted his back against the low marble chimney-piece, and prepared to meet his fate. It had come; the realisation of that horrible nightmare which had tormented him ever since the night of Maurice de Crespigny's death. It had come; detection, disgrace, humiliation, despair; no matter by what name it was

called; the thing was living death. His heart seemed to melt into water, and then freeze in his breast. He had seen the face of Victor Bourdon lurking behind Gilbert and Eleanor, and he knew that he had been betrayed.

The young man knew this, and determined to make a gallant finish. He was not a coward by nature, though his own wrong-doing had made him cowardly; he was only an irresolute, vacillating, selfish Sybarite, who had quarrelled with the great schoolmaster Fate, because his life had not been made one long summer's holiday. Even cowards sometimes grow courageous at the last. Launcelot Darrell was not a coward: he drew himself up to his fullest height, and prepared to confront his accusers.

Eleanor Monckton advanced towards him. Her husband tried to restrain her, but his effort was wasted; she waved him back with her hand, and went on to where the young man stood, with her head lifted and her nostrils quivering.

"At last, Launcelot Darrell," she cried, "after watching that has wearied me, and failures that have tempted me to despair, at last I can keep my promise; at last I can be true to the lost father whose death was your cruel work. When

last I was in this house, you laughed at me and defied me. I was robbed of the evidence that would have condemned you: all the world seemed leagued together against me. Now, the proof of your crime is in my hands, and the voice of your accomplice has borne witness against you. Cheat, trickster, and forger: there is no escape for you now."

"No," exclaimed Monsieur Bourdon, with an unctuous chuckle, "it is now your turn to be chased, my stripling; it is now your turn to be kick out of the door."

"From first to last, from first to last," said Eleanor, "you have been false and cruel. You wronged and deceived the friends who sent you to India——"

"Yaase!" interrupted the commercial traveller, who was very pale, and by no means too steady in his nerves, after the attack of delirium tremens. He had dropped into a chair, and sat trembling and grinning at his late patron, with a ghastly jocosity that was far from agreeable to behold. "Yaase, you cheat your mo-thair, you cheat your friends. You make belief to go to the Indias, but you do not go. You what you call—shally shilly, and upon the last moment,

when the machine is on the point of depart, you change the mind, you are well in England, there is a handsome career for you, as artist, you say. Then you will not go. But you have fear of your uncle, who has given the money for your—fit-out —and for your passage, and you make believe to do what they wish from you. You have a friend, a *confrère*, a Mr., who is to partake your cabin. You write to *heem*, you get *heem* to post your letters; you write to your mo-thair, in Clip-a-stone Street, and you say to her, 'Dear mo-thair, I cannot bear this broil climate; I am broil, I work the night and the day; I am indigo planter;" and you send your letter to the Indias to be posted; and your poor mo-thair belief you; and you are in Paris to enjoy yourself, to lead the life of student, a little Bohemian, but very gay. You read Balzac, you make the little sketches for the cheap Parisian journals. You are gamester, and win money from a poor old Englishman, the father of that lady there; and you make a cat'spaw of your friend, Victor Bourdon. You are a villain man, Monsieur Darrell, but it is finished with you."

"Listen to me, Launcelot Darrell," Gilbert Monckton said, quietly. "Every falsehood and

trick of which you have been guilty, from first to last, is known. There is no help for you. The will which my wife holds in her hand is the genuine will signed by Maurice de Crespigny. This man is prepared to testify that the will by which you took possession of this estate is a forgery, fabricated by you and Henry Lawford's clerk, who had in his possession a rough draught of the real will which he had written at Mr. de Crespigny's dictation, and who copied the three different signatures from three letters written by the old man to Henry Lawford. You are prepared to bear witness to this," added the lawyer, turning to Victor Bourdon.

"But certainly," exclaimed the Frenchman, "it being well understood that I am not to suffer by this candour. It is understood that I am innocent in this affair."

"Innocent!" cried Launcelot Darrell, bitterly. "Why you were the prime mover in this business. It was your suggestion that first induced—"

"It is possible, my friend," murmured Monsieur Bourdon, complacently; "but is it, then, a crime to make a little suggestion—to try to make oneself useful to a friend? I do not be-

lieve it! No matter. I have studied your English law: I do not think it can touch me, since I am only prepared to swear to having *found* this real will, and having before that *overheard* a conversation between you and the clerk of the avoué de Vindsor."

"You use noble tools, Mrs. Monckton," said Launcelot Darrell, "but I do not know by what right you come into my house, uninvited, and bringing in your train a very respectable transpontine scene-painter with whom I have not the honour to be intimate, and a French commercial traveller, who has chosen to make himself peculiarly obnoxious to me. It is for the Court of Chancery to decide whether I am the rightful owner of this house and all appertaining to it. I shall await the fiat of that court; and in the mean time I have the honour to wish you good evening."

He laid his hand upon the handle of the bell as he spoke, but he did not pull it.

"You defy me, then, Launcelot Darrell?" said Eleanor.

"I do."

"I am glad that it is so!" exclaimed the girl. "I am glad that you have not prayed to me for

mercy. I am glad that Providence has suffered me to avenge my father's death."

Eleanor Monckton was moving towards the door.

In all this time Ellen Darrell had not once spoken. She had stood apart in the recess of the window, a dark and melancholy shadow, mourning over the ruin of her life.

I think that she was scarcely surprised at what had happened. We sometimes know the people we love, and know them to be base; but we go on loving them desperately, nevertheless; and love them best when the world is against them, and they have most need of our love. I speak here of maternal love, which is so sublime an affection as to be next in order to the love of God.

The widow came suddenly into the centre of the room, and cast herself on her knees before Eleanor, and wound her arms about the girl's slender waist, pinning her to the spot upon which she stood, and holding her there. The mother's arms were stronger than bands of iron, for they were linked about the enemy of her son.

It has been demonstrated by practical zoologists that the king of beasts, his majesty the lion, is after all a cowardly creature. It is only the

lioness, *the mother*, whose courage is desperate and indomitable.

"You shall not do this," Ellen Darrell cried; "you shall not bring disgrace upon my son. Take your due, whatever it is; take your paltry wealth. You have plotted for it, I dare say. Take it, and let us go out of this place penniless. But no disgrace, no humiliation, no punishment, *for him!*"

"Mother," cried Launcelot, "get up off your knees. Let her do her worst. I ask no mercy of her."

"Don't hear him," gasped the widow, "don't listen to him. Oh, Eleanor, save him from shame and disgrace. Save him! save him! I was always good to you, was I not? I meant to be so, believe me! If ever I was unkind, it was because I was distracted by regrets and anxieties about him. Oh, Eleanor, forgive him, and be merciful to me. Forgive him. It is my fault that he is what he is. It was my foolish indulgence that ruined his childhood. It was my false pride that taught him to think he had a right to my uncle's money. From first to last, Eleanor, it is I that am to blame. Remember this, and forgive him, forgive—"

Her throat grew dry, and her voice broke, but her lips still moved, though no sound came from them, and she was still imploring mercy for her son.

"Forgive!" cried Eleanor, bitterly. "Forgive the man who caused my father's death! Do you think I have waited and watched for nothing? It seems to me as if all my life had been given up to this one hope. Do you know how that man has defied me?" she exclaimed, pointing to Launcelot Darrell. "Do you know that through him I have been divided from my husband? Bah! why do I speak of my own wrongs? Do you know that my father, a poor helpless old man, a lonely, friendless old man, a decayed gentleman, killed himself because of your son? Do you expect that I am to forget that? Do you think that I can forgive that man? Do you want me to abandon the settled purpose of my life, the purpose to which I have sacrificed every girlish happiness, every womanly joy, now that the victory is mine, and that I can keep my vow?"

She tried to disengage herself from Ellen Darrell's arms, but the widow still clung about her, with her head flung back, and her white face convulsed with anguish.

"Forgive him for my sake," she cried; "give him to me—give him to me. He will suffer enough from the ruin of his hopes. He will suffer enough from the consciousness of having done wrong. He *has* suffered. Yes. I have watched him, and I know. Take everything from him. Leave him a penniless dependent upon the pittance my uncle left to me, but save him from disgrace. Give him to me. God has given him to me. Woman, what right have you to take him from me?"

"He killed my father," Eleanor answered in a sombre voice; "my dead father's letter told me to be revenged upon him."

"Your father wrote in a moment of desperation. I knew him. I knew George Vane. *He* would have forgiven his worst enemy. He was the last person to be vindictive or revengeful when his first anger was passed. What good end will be gained by my son's disgrace? You shall *not* refuse to hear me. You are a wife, Eleanor Monckton: you may one day be a mother. If you are pitiless to me now, God will be pitiless to you then. You will think of me then. In every throb of pain your child may suffer; in every childish ailment that makes your heart grow sick

with unutterable fear, you will recognise God's vengeance upon you for this night's work. Think of this, Eleanor; think of this, and be merciful to me—to *me*—not to him. What *he* would have to endure would be only a tithe of *my* suffering. I am his mother—his mother!"

"Oh, my God!" cried Eleanor, lifting her clasped hands above her head. "*What* am I to do?"

The hour of her triumph had come; and in this supreme moment doubt and fear took possession of her breast. If this was her victory, it was only half a victory. She had never thought that any innocent creature would suffer more cruelly by her vengeance upon Launcelot Darrell than the man himself would suffer. And now here was this woman, whose only sin had been an idolatrous love of her son, and to whom his disgrace would be worse than the anguish of death.

The widow's agony had been too powerful for the girl's endurance. Eleanor burst into a passion of tears, and turning to her husband let her head fall upon his breast.

"What am I to do, Gilbert?" she said, "What am I to do?"

"I will not advise you, my dear," the lawyer answered, in a low voice. "To-night's business is of your own accomplishing. Your own heart must be your only guide."

There was silence in the room for a few moments, only broken by Eleanor's sobbing. Launcelot Darrell had covered his face with his hands. His courage had given way before the power of his mother's grief. The widow still knelt, still clung about the girl, with her white face fixed now, in an awful stillness.

"Oh, my dear, dead father!" Eleanor sobbed, "you—you did wrong yourself, sometimes; and you were always kind and merciful to people. Heaven knows, I have tried to keep my oath; but I cannot—I cannot. It seemed so easy to imagine my revenge when it was far away: but now—it is too hard—it is too hard. Take your son, Mrs. Darrell. I am a poor helpless coward. I cannot carry out the purpose of my life."

The white uplifted face scarcely changed, and the widow fell back in a heap upon the floor. Her son and Gilbert Monckton lifted her up and carried her to a chair in one of the open windows. Richard Thornton dropped on his knees

before Eleanor, and began to kiss her hands with *effusion.*

"Don't be frightened, Nelly," he exclaimed, "I was very fond of you once, and very unhappy about you, as my poor aunt can bear witness; but I am going to marry Eliza Montalambert, and we've got the carpets down at the snuggest little box in all Brixton, and I've made it up with Spavin and Cromshaw in consideration of my salary being doubled. Don't be frightened if I make a fool of myself, Eleanor; but I think I could worship you to-night. This is your victory, my dear. This is the only revenge Providence ever intended for beautiful young women with hazel-brown hair. God bless you."

Launcelot Darrell, with a greyish pallor spread over his face, like a napkin upon the face of a corpse, came slowly up to Eleanor.

"You have been very generous to me, Mrs. Monckton, though it is a hard thing for me to say as much," he said; "I have done wicked things, but I have suffered—I have suffered and repented perpetually. I had no thought of the awful consequences which would follow the wrong I did your father. I have hated myself for that wicked act ever since; I should never have forged

the will if that man had not come to me; and fooled me, and played upon my weaknesses. I will thank you for the mercy you have shown me by-and-by, Mrs. Monckton, when I am better worthy of your generosity."

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST.

GILBERT MONCKTON seconded his wife in all she wished to do. There was no scandal. All legal formalities were gone through very quietly. Those troublesome people who require to be informed as to the business of their neighbours, were told that a codicil had been found, which revoked the chief clause of Mr. de Crespigny's will. Mr. Peter Sedgewick and Mrs. Bannister were ready to perform all acts required of them; though the lady expressed considerable surprise at her half sister's unexpected accession of wealth. Eleanor Monckton entered into possession of the estates. The impulsive girl having once forgiven her father's enemy, would fain have surrendered the fortune to him into the bargain—but practical matter-of-fact people were at hand to prevent her being too generous. Mrs. Darrell and her son went to Italy, and Mrs. Monckton,

with her husband's concurrence, made the young man a very handsome allowance, which enabled him to pursue his career as an artist. He worked very hard, and with enthusiasm. The shame of the past gave an impetus to his pencil. His outraged self-esteem stood him his friend, and he toiled valiantly to redeem himself from the disgrace that had fallen upon him.

"If I am a great painter, they will remember nothing against me," he said to himself; and though it was not in him to become a great painter, he became a popular painter; a great man for the Royal Academy, and the West-End engravers, if only a small man for future generations, who will choose the real gems out of the prodigal wealth of the present. Mr. Darrell's first success was a picture which he called "The Earl's Death," from a poem of Tennyson's, with the motto, "Oh, the Earl was fair to see,"—a preternaturally ugly man lying at the feet of a preternaturally hideous woman, in a turret chamber lighted by lucifer matches—the blue and green light of the lucifers on the face of the ugly woman, and a pre-Raphaelite cypress seen through the window; and I am fain to say, that although the picture was ugly, there was a strange

weird attraction in it, and people went to see it again and again, and liked it, and hankered after it, and talked of it perpetually all that season; one faction declaring that the lucifer-match effect was the most delicious moonlight, and the murderess of the Earl the most lovely of womankind, till the faction who thought the very reverse of this became afraid to declare their opinions, and thus everybody was satisfied.

So Launcelot Darrell received a fabulous price for his picture, and, having lived without reproach during three years of probation, came home to marry Laura Mason Lennard, who had been true to him all this time, and who would have rather liked to unite her fortunes with those of a modern Cartouche or Jack Sheppard for the romance of the thing. And although the artist did not become a good man all in a moment, like the repentant villain of a stage play, he did take to heart the lesson of his youth. He was tenderly affectionate to the mother who had suffered so much by reason of his errors; and he made a very tolerable husband to a most devoted little wife.

Monsieur Victor Bourdon was remunerated, and very liberally—for his *services*, and was told

to hold his tongue. He departed for Canada soon afterwards, in the interests of the patent mustard, and never reappeared in the neighbourhood of Tolldale Priory.

Eleanor insisted on giving up Woodlands for the use of Mr. Darrell, his wife, and mother. Signora Picirillo lived with her nephew and his merry little wife in the pretty house at Brixton; but she paid very frequent visits to Tolldale Priory, sometimes accompanied by Richard and Mrs. Richard, sometimes alone. Matrimony had a very good effect upon the outward seeming of the scene-painter: for his young wife initiated him in the luxury of shirt-buttons, as contrasted with pins; to say nothing of the delights of a shower-bath, and a pair of ivory-backed hair-brushes, presented by Eleanor as a birthday present to her old friend. Richard at first suggested that the ivory-backed brushes should be used as chimney ornaments in the Brixton drawing-room; but afterwards submitted to the popular view of the subject, and brushed his hair. Major and Mrs. Lennard were also visitors at Tolldale, and Laura knew the happiness of paternal and maternal love—the paternal affection evincing itself in the presentation of a great deal of

frivolous jewellery, purchased upon credit; the maternal devotion displaying itself in a wild admiration of Launcelot Darrell's son and heir, a pink-faced baby, who made his appearance in the year 1861, and who was in much better drawing than the "Dying Gladiator," exhibited by Mr. Darrell in the same year. Little children's voices sounded by-and-by in the shady pathways of the old-fashioned Priory garden, and in all Berkshire there was not a happier woman than Gilbert Monckton's beautiful young wife.

And, after all, Eleanor's Victory was a proper womanly conquest, and not a stern, classical vengeance. The tender woman's heart triumphed over the girl's rash vow; and poor George Vane's enemy was left to the only Judge whose judgments are always righteous.

THE END.

BRADBURY AND EVANS, PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

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Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018